

Gandhi Memorial College Of Education Bantala Jammu

V.S. NAIPAUL

*A HOUSE FOR
MR BISWAS*



RAMJI LALL

V.S. NAIPAUL

A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

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V.S. NAIPAUL

A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

[*A Critical Study*]

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PREFACE

A House for Mr. Biswas has justly been recognized as one of the best novels in contemporary English fiction. The most striking feature of this work is its "crowdedness", there being a large number of characters all of whom have been made to live before us. We cannot say that the novel contains a gripping story, but the deficiency in plot-interest is more than made up by vivid character-portrayal, graphic descriptions, and the abundance of humour. Although the book has a serious underlying significance, it is the rich comedy of the book which makes the book an unforgettable one, besides of course the delineation of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas who is called "Mr. Biswas" throughout the novel, from the very time of his birth.

This critical study of Naipaul's masterpiece is designed to meet the examination requirements of advanced students of English Literature. Naipaul, a West Indian by birth, ranks with the best English novelists; and this critical study is an attempt to acquaint the students with his literary genius as also to enable them to meet the challenge of the examinations.

RAMJI LALL

New Delhi
April, 1987

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Or

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Or

Write an account of the dissolution of the Tulsi family as depicted by Naipaul in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

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Or

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Or

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Or

What evidence of unreasonableness and of an inadequacy in himself do you find in Mr. Biswas's attitudes to the Tulsi family in the course of this novel?

Or

Mr. Biswas has been accused of pettiness and cantankerousness in his behaviour towards the Tulsi family. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

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Or

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7. Write a note on the symbolic elements in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

What symbolic devices does Naipaul use in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and with what effect ?

Or

Discuss Naipaul's use of the symbolic technique in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

"The book is powerfully symbolic." Substantiate this view about *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

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8. Is Mr. Biswas's achievement in finally buying a house a triumph or a failure ? Give reasons for your answer.

Or

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5. Examine the ironic features of 4 House for Mr. Biswas
6. Would you regard Mr. Biswas as a hero? Give reasons for your answer
7. Does Mr. Biswas attain the stature of a hero in Nigam's novel?
8. Select Bibliography

V.S. Naipaul : A Biographical Sketch

His Indian Background

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born on the 17th August, 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad.* His grandfather had emigrated to Trinidad from Benares (now called Varanasi) in Uttar Pradesh (India) as an indentured labourer. His father, Seepersad, was a reporter for a newspaper called the *Trinidad Guardian*, and also a short story writer. It was Naipaul's father who provided for Naipaul the first models for the latter's literary and journalistic interests. From an early age, Naipaul chose to develop his literary heritage while rejecting orthodox Hinduism and the colonial society in which he was born. When Naipaul was a student in the fourth form at Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain, he took a vow to escape from Trinidad within the next five years. Actually, it took him six years to escape from the island of his birth. Incidentally, Naipaul has five sisters and a brother; and the brother too became a novelist as did Naipaul himself.

An Oxford Graduate. His Early Novels

Naipaul's father died in 1953. But Naipaul had already, in 1950, at the age of eighteen, left Trinidad to study at University College, Oxford, his subject of study being English literature. After taking his B.A. degree from the Oxford University, he first took up broadcasting as a career. But soon he got engaged in several other activities. He edited a literary programme for the B.B.C.; he published book reviews; he wrote features for several magazines and journals; and he did extensive travelling too. By the age of twenty-three he had completed his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, which saw the light of the day in 1957. This was followed by another novel called *The Suffrage of Elvira* which appeared in 1958. Then in 1959 came another novel called *Miguel Street*. All these novels were light, satiri-

*Trinidad is one of the islands which together are called the West Indies. Trinidad became an independent country in 1962. Its capital is Port of Spain.

cal comedies, the first two centring on politics and elections, and the third dramatizing the frustrating meaninglessness of urban poverty.

His Romantic Vision of a Writer At the Outset

Naipaul recalls that from the very beginning he was determined not to accept regular employment but to take up writing as a career. For ten weeks in 1957 he did indeed take up a job with a Concrete Company in London but even this job involved the writing of articles, though the articles pertained to buildings. This job did not really suit him, and he gave it up suddenly one day at lunch-time. He tells us that he began to write for no other reason than because he thought that it would be nice to be a writer. He started with a very romantic vision of the writer as a free, gifted, talented, creative person, with writing as a kind of social and cultural attribute. He visualized writing as a great cherishing of the self—by others and by himself. But soon he discovered that writing was a sign of disease, a sickness. He called it a form of anguish; he called it despair.

Settled Permanently in London

He was now living in London and in this big city he found himself confined to a smaller world than he had ever known. His life was now confined to his flat, in fact, to his desk. He has since lived in England on a permanent basis, though he has been travelling a good deal to other countries. In 1955 he had married an English woman. He looks upon himself as a man without roots: he never felt at home in Trinidad, the land of his birth; and he has been repelled by India, the land of his origin. He is also on record as having said that he never lived in any house for more than three and a half years. But he made this statement long ago, in 1962.

His Rejection of the Three Alternatives Before Him

In 1958 Naipaul saw that he was faced with three alternatives, all of which he had to reject. The first was that he should write about sex. But he found that he could not write about this subject because he did not have the necessary skill or the required experience if his writing about it was to have some variety. And then he also felt that writing about sex would embarrass him, that his friends would laugh at him, and that his mother would feel shocked. The second alternative for him was to introduce an English or American character in a novel being written by him, and to weave the story around that character. This was the device being used by British film makers who would put American characters in the most unusual setting. Naipaul felt that doing so was good business but bad art. The third alternative was to write about race and racial discrimination. But such writing, he thought, gave only a certain sadistic pleasure to the white readers who derived a vicarious sense of power from reading it. He found that in the first place he had no inclination to write that kind of book and secondly that the race issue

was too complicated to be dealt with in a novel. Then it was suggested to him by some well-wishers that he should stop being a regional writer and should write about England. He did feel like writing about England, but he found that there were insuperable difficulties in the way.

His Fourth Novel

In 1961 Naipaul published his fourth novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, regarded by many as one of the best novels in English fiction. The story of Mohun Biswas in this novel captures authentic West Indian life, but it also transcends provincial boundaries and suggests concepts which are universal in their human implications. This novel has been called an epic, and its protagonist has been described as Everyman. Mr. Biswas's desperate struggle to acquire a house of his own in this novel is symbolic of an individual's need to develop an authentic identity. This novel marks the climax of the early phase of Naipaul's artistic development.

A Travel-Book : "The Middle Passage"

Immediately preceding the publication of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul travelled a good deal for several months in the Caribbean. The product of this experience was a travel-book called *The Middle Passage*, published in 1962. In this book he treats the West Indies as a derelict land. His portrayal of life in the Caribbean islands is in no way favourable to the West Indians. Naipaul had by now become quite famous. This fame resulted chiefly from the sensitive lucidity of his prose, and the riotous humour of the West Indian dialogue, character, and narration in his novels. Each time he finished a book, he felt that it was the best which he could write. During the first five years of his writing career he had written three books (all novels), but he had earned from them only three hundred pounds in all.

Another Novel; and Another Travel-Book

Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, Naipaul's fifth novel, but his sixth publication, came in 1963. It seemed to mark a complete break with West Indies though Naipaul here retains his familiar themes of individual isolation, of crossed purposes, and of man's need to find himself. Then in 1964 came another travel-book called *An Area of Darkness* which was the result of his travels in India, the country of his origin. He had visited India with great hopes, but actually he felt deeply disappointed and frustrated. *An Area of Darkness* contains his account of the depressing conditions which prevailed in the various Indian cities which he visited. An Indian should read this book in a spirit of detachment and should not be prevented by his excessive patriotism from recognizing the authentic quality of the author's impressions of this country as recorded here. Fortunately, Naipaul's experience of visiting India did not mark a

dead end. In 1967, Naipaul published another novel, under the title of *The Mimic Men*. Here Naipaul returns to the subject of West Indian politics; and the story deals with the theme of colonial mimicry, that is, the liberated subject people of a country aping the manners and behaviour of their erstwhile rulers.

A Historical Work, and Subsequent Publications

For his next book, Naipaul turned to another form of writing, namely history. This book, called *The Loss of El Dorado*, appeared in 1969, and it gives us the history of four centuries of West Indian life, though it focuses on only two episodes, apparently unrelated to each other. In 1971 came a book of short stories under the heading *In a Free State*, which is a collection of a novella, two long short stories, and two journal entries, all of which develop in one way or another the significance of the title. In 1972 came *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, a collection of his longer essays. Then followed at long or short intervals the novel *Guerrillas* (1975), *India—A Wounded Civilization* (1977), a novel called *A Bend in the River* (1979), a historical work called *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980), and another travel-book, *Among the Believers* (1981).

A Novelist of International Renown

Naipaul is at present a writer of international renown. Several of his books have won awards and prizes. The prizes and awards won by him include the Booker Prize; the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize; the Somerset Maugham Award; the Hawthornden Prize; W.H. Smith Award; the Phoenix Trust Award; and the Jerusalem Prize. Much more is yet to come from Naipaul, and perhaps many more honours are to be won by him. But he is on record as having said that the thought of writing for the rest of one's life is a nightmare. "As you get older the work gets more difficult because the writing inevitably becomes more complex. I find it so hard now, particularly fiction which, in my own practice of it, has changed because the world is so complex."

V.S. Naipaul : His Principal Works

I. NOVELS

(1) *The Mystic Masseur* (1957). This book describes the career of an imaginative islander who raises through a series of failures as a teacher, a writer, and a masseur to become a successful politician and then ultimately a disillusioned M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire).

(2) *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), dealing with the misadventures of political aspirants in rural island election campaigns.

(3) *Miguel Street* (1959), being a portrait-gallery of the inhabitants of an urban slum in Trinidad.

(4) *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). This novel traces the struggle of Mr. Biswas to own a house which he ultimately does manage to acquire, though his premature death has a touch of tragedy about it. The book has universal implications.

(5) *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963). With retirement looming ahead of him, Mr. Stone initiates a project to salvage his life and to ward off oblivion, but fails because another man reaps the benefit of that project.

(6) *The Mimic Men* (1967). The book deals with one, Ralph Kripal Singh, who is suspended between the island of his birth and the cosmopolitan world, and who sees his life in terms of play-acting, disorder, and isolation. The action of the story takes place on an imaginary island situated in the Caribbean.

(7) *Guerrillas* (1975). This novel deals with a Caribbean island after its achievement of freedom. Social and political unrest create tensions; and circumstances render life hollow and aimless. The characters abuse each other with more violence than in any of Naipaul's previous works.

(8) *A Bend in the River* (1979). This novel gives us an account of the personal relationships of an Indian Muslim called Salim with a large number of other characters in the book. The setting of the story in this novel is a French-speaking African State. Thus, here Naipaul has moved from West Indies as well as from England to a remote land. Besides tracing the personal relationships, the novel also depicts the changes which take place in the life of the nation through the efforts of its President who takes new initiatives. The novel is predominantly pessimistic.

II. SHORT STORIES

(1) *A Flag on the Island* (1967). This book contains a novella and a number of short stories. The novella has the title *A Flag on the Island* which also serves as the title for the entire book. The novella depicts a commercialized island paradise, and deals also with the lost and borrowed identities. The stories which figure in this collection are the following :

- (i) "My Aunt's Gold Teeth"
- (ii) "The Raffle"
- (iii) "A Christmas Story"
- (iv) "The Mourners"
- (v) "The Night Watchman's Occurrence Book"
- (vi) "The Enemy"
- (vii) "Greenie and Yellow"
- (viii) "The Perfect Tenants"
- (ix) "The Heart"
- (x) "The Baker's Story."

These stories were written during the period 1950-1967; and the setting varies from London flats and hotels to West Indian homes, shops, and streets.

(2) *In a Free State* (1975). This book also contains one novella and a number of short stories. The title of the novella is the same as the title of the collection as a whole. The novella presents two characters who confront their private failures and inadequacies, while tribal warfare surrounds them in a newly formed African country. The short stories are as follows :

- (i) "Prologue, From a Journal"
- (ii) "The Tramp at Piraeus"
- (iii) "One Out of Many"
- (iv) "Tell Me Who to Kill"
- (v) "Epilogue, From a Journal"
- (vi) "The Circus at Luxor."

III. TRAVEL BOOKS

(1) *The Middle Passage* (1962). The book deals with Naipaul's experiences in the course of his travels through and over the West Indies. He depicts the West Indies as a derelict land. He shows how tourism, which he regards as a new kind of slavery, continues to degrade the people. The book takes a highly unfavourable view of the conditions of life in the group of islands forming the West Indies. If in his early novels Naipaul presents an absurd world as real, in this travel-book he presents a real world as futile and absurd.

(2) *An Area of Darkness* (1964). This book is a record of Naipaul's travels in India. Naipaul had wished to settle down in the country of his origin but he found the conditions prevalent in this country to be most disgusting and he therefore gave up this intention just as he had previously decided not to live in Trinidad permanently. Subsequently, he settled down in England. Lost among the chaotic millions of this country, he searched for his ancestral roots but failed in his search. The concluding chapter of this book is entitled "Flight", and in it he says that his discovery of himself, made by him during this trip to India, had broken his life into two. The book contains his deep despair and his sense of utter futility which he reaped as a result of his travels in this country.

(3) *Among the Believers : An Islamic Journey* (1981).

IV. HISTORY

(1) *The Loss of El Dorado* (1970). Here Naipaul gives us the results of his research into the history of the West Indies from the time of the discovery of these islands in 1498 to the time of his writing this book. He re-creates scenes and characters, bringing to life the events which shaped the dreams and the nightmares of the people of these islands. This book provides a mass of information about four centuries of life in the West Indies.

(2) *India, a Wounded Civilization* (1977). Here Naipaul describes his view of the conditions in India as they prevailed during the Emergency. The book is also a study of Indian attitudes.

(3) *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980). This book contains four previously published essays on Michael X and the Black Power killings in Trinidad; a study of Peron's Argentina; an account of Mobutu's Zaire; and a critical essay on Joseph Conrad.

V. ESSAYS, MAGAZINE ARTICLES, AND BOOK REVIEWS

Naipaul has written numerous essays, book reviews, and articles for newspapers and magazines. As a book reviewer, he has been really prolific. He has written about books by Indians, West Indians, Americans, Englishmen, Russians, Japanese, Irishmen, Germans, and Italians. The authors discussed by him are equally varied and include many well-known names. He has distinguished himself as an essayist also. He published in 1972 a book called *The Overcrowded*

Barracoön, which is a collection of some of his more important essays. The title essay in this collection deals with the colonialism which prevailed in Mauritius. In the essay Naipaul dwells upon unemployment, fatalism, fantasy, and the fragmentation marking the conditions there. The other essays in this collection are :

- (i) "Cannery Row Revisited"
- (ii) "East Indian, West Indian"
- (iii) "The Election in Ajmer"
- (iv) "In the Middle of the Journey"
- (v) "Jamshed into Jimmy"
- (vi) "Magic and Dependence"
- (vii) "Mailer's Dream"
- (viii) "Mr. Matsuda's Million-Dollar Gamble"
- (ix) "Power to the Caribbean People"
- (x) "St. Kitts : Papa and the Power Set"
- (xi) "Sporting Life"
- (xii) "Tragedy : The Missing Sense"
- (xiii) "Twilight of a Colony"
- (xiv) "Words On Their Own".

The Major Novels of V.S. Naipaul

The following may be regarded as Naipaul's major works in the field of fiction :

- (1) *The Mystic Masseur* (1957)
- (2) *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961)
- (3) *The Mimic Men* (1967)
- (4) *Guerrillas* (1975).

A brief consideration of each of these novels will help us in understanding Naipaul's distinctive qualities as a novelist.

1. THE MYSTIC MASSEUR (1957)

The History of Ganesh Ramsumair

This novel tells the story of a man called Ganesh Ramsumair belonging to Trinidad. The author has made the claim that the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times. The claim is valid, but only to a limited extent. This book, variously described as a spiritual thriller and a metaphysical whodunit,* has had an enormous success, especially in Central America and in the Caribbean.

From Ganesh Ramsumair to G. Ramsay Muir

Ganesh Ramsumair has been formally educated to only a low level ; but he has read widely and, by making use of this wide reading, he is able to establish himself first as a masseur, and finally as a religious and psychological adviser, or a pundit. His fame spreads over the whole of Trinidad and, in 1946, when the first elections are held on this island, Ganesh manages to cash in on his popularity and gets elected as a member of the Legislative Council.

* *Whodunit*—Who done it ? Who is responsible for having committed the deed ? This expression is generally used for a detective story.

In his new role, he shows himself a great patriot and a defender of the rights of the people of Trinidad; and he refuses even to participate in the rituals of the British rulers of the island. He even supports a strike of the sugar-workers, expressing some vague Marxist ideas. However, when he is roughly handled by the crowd, his sympathies turn in the opposite direction and, as a consequence, he adopts the clothes and attitudes of the Britishers. When he is no longer an elected member of the Legislative Council, he is nominated to that body, and afterwards receives the title of M.B.E. Finally, he appears in England under the name of G. Ramsay Muir. In each step of this career, the author is satirizing the rise to power of a representative of the people in a country which is about to achieve its independence from British rule.

Humour ; Sparseness of Detail About Society

The account of the career of Ganesh is replete with humour; but there is a sparseness of concrete detail about the society of which Ganesh is a representative. In other words, though we are told much about Ganesh's own life and career, we are not told enough about the society of which he is a representative. There is simply not sufficient detail of the interaction of the society to support the author's claim that the book is a history of our times. Another weakness of the book is the inconsistency in the literary power granted to the narrator by the author. The narrator is, of course, Ganesh himself, and so the story is written in the first person pronoun.

Two Conflicting Views of Life

In the character of Ganesh, the author presents the dilemma to which the author often returns in his novels. The dilemma consists in the problem of reconciling two conflicting views of life. During Ganesh's early career, events happen to him, and he makes no effort to direct or control them. He even marries Leela Ramlogan because her father has decided upon this match. Ganesh's attitude in these matters is mildly fatalistic, and this seems to justify his lack of initiative and his success by reference to God's will. However, success does come to him, and, under its impact, he begins to see that advancement in life can be achieved by deliberate planning, correctly made and energetically executed. From this point, his success grows and, in the context of the book, it is manifested symbolically by his acquisition of western goods and products. His house expands; he moves into business ventures related to his success as a pundit; and he obtains a refrigerator which he keeps filled with bottles of Coca Cola, thus showing the triumph of western civilization. Ganesh now plans, looks ahead, perceives opportunities, whereas previously he had simply expected events. The whole book is written lightly, the novel being primarily comic in intention even though the subject is one which Naipaul takes seriously.

The Author's Contempt For His People For Aping the Whites

Although the book is genial enough, a certain lack of sympathy on the part of the author is clearly perceptible. The hero approaches his lowest point of achievement in such scenes as the dinner at Government House where the author describes an imaginary confrontation between the most unsophisticated members of Creole and Indian society on one side and the highly civilized and sophisticated wife of the governor. All that Naipaul finds ridiculous in Creole society is brought out in this scene: the bad grammar, the lack of taste or social grace, and the struggle to behave like the white people. A black man is shown as being dressed in a blue suit with yellow gloves and a monocle which eventually falls into the soup. Several of the guests at the dinner have difficulty in using their knives and forks. Of course, we can accept such a scene as farcical and as intended to show the Creoles and the Indians following the painful and absurd road to civilization and sophistication exemplified by the whites. But we also get the impression that Naipaul himself regards these people with more contempt than compassion and that he is therefore wanting in sympathy. These are the same people whom Naipaul afterwards described in *The Middle Passage* as being "like monkeys pleading for evolution". The incongruity of his position here is that, while he laughs and mocks at the Creoles who crudely imitate and ape standards of pseudo-whiteness, he can only do so by assuming these very standards himself.

2. THE MIMIC MEN (1967)

A Story of Success Leading Ultimately to Failure

The Mimic Men returns to the subject of West Indian politics which had figured in Naipaul's two earlier novels, *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), and *Miguel Street* (1959). The story here deals with the theme of colonial mimicry or imitation. Here again the narrator of the story is the chief protagonist himself. The protagonist is a man called Ralph Kripal Singh who spends his childhood on the island of Isabella, goes abroad to attend school in England, marries an English girl, and returns to his newly independent home-land where he makes money and rides the tide of nationalistic fervour to political power. But eventually he finds himself an exile from Isabella and has to settle down in London.

A Political Novel, Dealing With Corruption

Naipaul might have called this novel "Hollow Men" if T.S. Eliot had not already used this title for one of his poems. For the theme of this novel, like the theme of Eliot's poem, is corruption—corruption of the body politic and corruption of the individual human soul. This theme is emphasized by the narrator's sense of corruption of the human body in relationships where he should have been aware only of the body's pleasures. *The Mimic Men* is a political novel, dealing with society in the island called Isabella

(situated in the Caribbean). The novel takes the form of an autobiography by the chief character, Ralph Kripal Singh. The novel is of particular relevance to everybody belonging to a country which goes through a period of rapid political change after having achieved independence from foreign rule.

Three Parts of the Novel

There is a clear structural pattern behind the narrator's voice. The novel is divided into three parts. In Part I, the narrator is in London, contrasting his new impressions of this city with those which he had formed there shortly after the war. In this part he talks about his student days, his marriage to an English girl named Sandra, his return to Isabella, his success in the world of business, politics, and the "jet set", and the break-up of his marriage. In Part II, the narrator moves further back in time, to his childhood days. In Part III, the narrator concentrates on his political experiences and then goes back to the present in London, including an unsuccessful love-affair, with a Lady Stella.

The Flaws in the Novel

The novel is not without its flaws. For instance, although we are shown the relationship between the young Ralph Singh and Browne, we are not told how this relationship develops into a political alliance. We also do not see how Singh and Browne are able to get their support from the masses in the first instance. Instead, we merely get comments like the following :

The truth of the movement lay in the Roman house. It also lay in our undeniable success. We offered, as it soon appeared, more than release from bitterness. We offered drama.

Drama is exactly what Naipaul does not offer in such a description ! Similarly, the collapse of Singh's relationship with his wife Sandra is not dramatized. In fact, it was never much of a relationship because Sandra, like Singh himself, had not yet fully matured ; and Singh betrays whatever relationship did exist by having affairs with other women. Suddenly Singh learns that Sandra too has been having affairs. Now, this disclosure is just conveyed to us in such a way that we are unable to feel its impact in emotional and moral terms. Singh's comment on his discovery is : "And I was amazed at my innocence." But the comment falls flat. And, then, Singh sometimes raises expectations which he never fulfils.

Not Just a Political Satire

However, the failures of this novel are small as compared to its achievements. Naipaul's technique gives to the novel a fuller substance than that of a political satire. For corruption and degradation have not been produced on the island of Isabella by political activities. The people there had been suffering from the consequences of class and race differences even before political activities began.

An example of the deep racial wounds in West Indian society is a painful scene in the novel where a young boy called Hok ignores his mother because she is a Negro whereas he, being of mixed blood, does not look like a Negro. The rejection occurs when a file of schoolboys, including Singh, is marching along the road.

A Hollow Society

Naipaul excels in his observation of political life in such a hollow society and its victims. For example, when in exile in London, Singh goes to one of the big shops. He recognizes one of the girls working there. Singh had met this girl at a conference of non-aligned nations. Her husband had been one of the fire-brands. In those days, she had looked splendid in her rich costumes. But now the regulation skirt and blouse worn by all the shop-assistants had converted this girl to an untidy bundle. Singh felt that he could not face her, and so he left the shop without making his purchases.

A Wholly Pessimistic Novel

The Mimic Men is thus a novel wholly pessimistic. Hardly any character in the book has any ideals or any values beyond grabbing whatever one can get for oneself. The only person who reveals ideals of any kind is the narrator's father, a poor teacher; and he too breaks away from Isabella society to lead an eccentric political-cum-religious movement which flickers briefly until he dies of a gun-shot.

A Moral Consciousness, Operative in the Novel

Although *The Mimic Men* is pessimistic, yet it possesses a dimension which books like *The Suffrage of Elvira* cannot claim. *The Mimic Men* is not only about corruption but also about betrayal. Now, a recognition of betrayal presupposes the existence of a moral consciousness and a scale of human values. Thus, the despair and pessimism contained in *The Mimic Men* do not lead us to the conclusion that human beings on the island of Isabella are damned or irrelevant. In fact, the novel reveals valuable truths about such a degraded society. It is true that the narrator never displays any ideals as a practising politician but, despite his self-indulgence, he has a moral consciousness; and in his story he attaches moral significance to what he has seen and experienced and what he himself has done or not done. The story is thus presented to us through the sieve of a moral consciousness which recognizes a wrong when a wrong has been committed.

3. GUERRILLAS (1975)

The Half-Chinese Jimmy Ahmed

The scene here is once again a West Indian island which is being independently governed but which is in reality "owned" by an

American bauxite company. Outside the capital city, a man called Jimmy Ahmed has established a commune at a place known as Thrushcross Grange. Jimmy is half-Chinese ; and he enjoys a reputation as a respectable black power leader, a reputation which came with him from England where he once enjoyed a brief notoriety. But the commune established by Jimmy is on the point of collapse : the mysterious disappearance of one member is being investigated by the police ; and another member has sneaked off to see his favourite film called "For Love of Ivy". Jimmy is alone with his fantasies and his fears. He is regarded as a threat by Meredith, a sophisticated politician.

A Triangle of Relationships

Two visitors come to this island. They are Peter Roche and his English mistress Jane. They have taken up residence in a new house on the Ridge and they have begun to get on each other's nerves. Roche is a white South African who had been imprisoned for suspected involvement in acts of sabotage against the government in his country. Now he has got a job with a local business firm. He is tentatively attracted to Jimmy. Jane, who who has been feeling disappointed with Roche after discovering that he is a hollow kind of man, also feels attracted by Jimmy and insists on visiting Thrushcross Grange. Jimmy feels flattered by Roche's interest, while he regards Jane as a threat to his stability. Thus a triangle is formed consisting of Jimmy, Roche, and Jane. The triangle is composed of very base elements which may be defined as self-disgust, mutual irritation, idle curiosity, and misdirected impulse. Jane is sacrificed in these relationships when Jimmy brutally stabs her to death ; but it is Jimmy who is depicted as the victim.

The Characterization of Jimmy, Jane, and Roche

The author's attitude towards Jimmy is at times very sympathetic, but his treatment of Jane is always harsh. She is described in strong physical terms. Beneath her apparent self-confidence, there is the muddle of her thoughts and emotions ; and there is the ugly, insistent sexuality of her body which perspires and menstruates beyond her control and which finally brings about its own destruction. The author's descriptions of the West Indian landscape are equally sensual and create a similar feeling of unease. Only Roche remains shadowy throughout as a physical presence, but even his motives are somewhat obscure until the brilliant scene near the end of the book, where he reveals that his acts of political courage had been partly influenced by a strong sense of physical shame. The novel ends with Roche behaving in a morally shameful manner ; he, too, is a kind of victim.

Shame, a Recurrent Motif in the Novel

In fact, shame is a recurrent motif in this novel. Jane feels ashamed of being a privileged person ; Jimmy is ashamed of not being fully a Negro ; and Roche is ashamed of the hollowness inside him and of a "revolution" which can be quelled by a few American helicopters, and of living in a place which has exhausted its possibilities. Jane and Roche give vent to their shame in bickering conversations, in scoring intellectual points, and in an assumed candour. Jimmy can appease his shame only by degrading a white woman, by a joyless rape and by a motiveless murder. Shame hangs over the long afternoon spent at Harry de Tunja's beach house, where Meredith plays a game with Roche, Jane, and his host. Meredith tells them to imagine that they have got everything they wanted in the world and then to describe how they would all spend a day. Before they reply, he writes down with prophetic accuracy : "The life being described is the life the speaker lives or a life he has already lived. The setting may change, but no one will make a fresh start or do anything new." Elsewhere, Jimmy makes a similar point : "When everybody wants to fight, there's nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerrilla."

An Explicit Treatment of Sex in This Novel

In this novel Naipaul deals with sex more explicitly than he had ever done before. Jimmy is bisexual, having relations with his friend Bryant as well as with Jane. Jane, who seems to take little pleasure in sex, yet jumps into bed as readily as she meets a man. Roche quickly proves inadequate to meet Jane's requirements who has been in search of a man of accomplishments. Jimmy tries to compensate for his basic insecurity and uncertainty by indulging in fantasies about his potency, both sexual and political. In the course of the novel, Jimmy's move to power fails ; and, as something of a terrible reaction, he brings his two current lovers together in a brutal murder.

A Stimulating But Depressing Novel. Tersenens of Style

Guerrillas is an extremely depressing book. But it is also an extremely stimulating one. In his later novels, Naipaul has been steadily working towards a vision of the modern world which is at the same time bleak and honest. In the process, his style has become increasingly concentrated and allusive. His prose, simple on the surface, does not always reveal its full meaning at first sight. The structure is elaborate, but produces an effect of economy. The manner is controlled to the point of terseness, but the matter resounds like a cry of pain. In *Guerrillas* Naipaul the stylist is in fact at his finest. The intricate shifts in points of view are managed with such skill that the unfolding story becomes a study in anticipation and reiteration. Symbol, image, and minute gesture delineate and reinforce character and theme with the greatest economy of expression. To

emphasize the ironic absurdity of all his characters' actions, Naipaul arranges it so that at the end of the novel Jimmy is again calling Roche "Massa"; Roche is flying away from the island with no particular objective in mind other than escape, and Jane's mutilated body not only remains unsought; it is as if she had never existed.

A Strong Autobiographical Element in Naipaul's Fiction

There has always been a strong autobiographical element in Naipaul's fiction. While the novels and short stories have seldom been about himself, they have reflected the various stages of his disillusionment with Trinidad, his despair with India, and his concern with being a homeless ex-colonial, a citizen of the western world and of the Third World during a time of rapid social change. He seems to feel in his isolation, and his uprootedness, an analogy to the breakdown of a central cultural and political authority in the modern world. That accounts for the portraits of modern moral anarchy in his later novels.

4. A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS (1961)

A Satirical Novel

As a satirist, Naipaul's most impressive achievements are *The Mystic Masseur* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The form and technique of these novels allow him to preserve a critical detachment throughout and provide ample scope for his satiric wit. At the same time, however, these works clearly show his lack of compassion and how completely destructive his mode of satire can be.

Superior to Naipaul's Three Earlier Novels

A House for Mr. Biswas in many ways brings together the central tenets of the picaresque* novel that marked all three of Naipaul's earlier works (*The Mystic Masseur*; *The Suffrage of Elvira*; and *Miguel Street*). Here we have the chronicle of a low-born child who, because of physical and economic limitations, is compelled to live by his wits. His story is a series of episodes which, though never spectacular, are unusual and sometimes absurd. Through Mr. Biswas's various associations and experiences with people in different places and of different positions, Naipaul gets an excellent opportunity to satirize the social classes. With some degree of fantasy in some of the episodes, the novel is yet predominantly realistic in its attention to vivid detail, its adherence to the level of low life, and its candid, straightforward presentation. At the same time, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is superior to the preceding novels of Naipaul because of its fullness of character-development.

Mr. Biswas's Goal in Life

A House for Mr. Biswas gains its symbolic eminence because of its background of deprivation, crowding, and insecurity which make

* A picaresque novel is one which describes the adventures of a rogue. Here Mr. Biswas is a low-born child who, because of physical and economic limitations, is compelled to live by his wits. His story is a series of episodes which, though never spectacular, are unusual and sometimes absurd. Through Mr. Biswas's various associations and experiences with people in different places and of different positions, Naipaul gets an excellent opportunity to satirize the social classes. With some degree of fantasy in some of the episodes, the novel is yet predominantly realistic in its attention to vivid detail, its adherence to the level of low life, and its candid, straightforward presentation. At the same time, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is superior to the preceding novels of Naipaul because of its fullness of character-development.

the possession of a private dwelling an ideal goal for an inhabitant of Trinidad. The various lodging places have all their drawbacks. Hanuman House is authoritarian and oppressive in its organization; the houses at The Chase and Green Vale are unbearable burdens because of the uncertainties surrounding their construction; the Shorthills and Port of Spain buildings are dispiriting because of their rapid deterioration under the hands of the exploitative Tulsi family. These lodging places form a backdrop and they at the same time motivate Mr. Biswas towards his goal. The impact of setting is nowhere more explicit than in Mr. Biswas's memory of the trees and the Tulsi-owned barracks where he lived at Green Vale.

Mr. Biswas, a Modernized Version of Everyman

Mr. Biswas has been regarded as an Everyman; but if he is really one he is a modernized version, because in his confrontation with the vicissitudes of life he expresses a keen awareness of the absurd. He conforms to Albert Camus's fundamental definition of the absurd. According to that definition, the absurd man "feels within him a longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." After the novels of the 1950's and 1960's, this type of literary figure is not new; it has been made familiar by several novelists. Mr. Biswas belongs largely to that type; and he also belongs to the category of characters created by such nineteenth-century school of social realists as Dickens and Hardy. Mr. Biswas simultaneously embodies the alienated modern man and the sensitive though ineffectual reformer. His desperate bid for improvement is a self-centred one; but his struggle against a rigid social system makes his rebellion an affirmation of universal values. The result is that his sordid personal struggle becomes one which seems to have been undertaken on behalf of the group.

A Hero, Despite His Shortcomings

The ending of Mr. Biswas's life, like the rest of it, is unspectacular. His view of the world, as reflected in the way he has lived, is faulty and short-sighted; but his struggle is not without its touches of heroism. Indeed, Mr. Biswas is at times petty, cowardly, and contemptible. But part of the triumph of this novel is that Naipaul has been able to present a hero in all his littleness and absurdity and yet been able to preserve a sense of the man's inner dignity. His romantic, self-centred egotism has denied to him the simple pleasure of sympathetic human companionship and understanding until it is almost too late; but then he is the one who has paid the price of loneliness; the kind of loneliness which, in fact, lies at the heart of the human condition. Perhaps, Mr. Biswas's most commendable quality, which compensates for all that is contemptible in him, is the unflinching presence of his faith in the value of the attempt. It is this faith which keeps him going; it is this which makes him appear a rebel. He refuses to conform, to give up his identity, and to allow the sordidness of his life to crush him. His courageous struggle in the face of absurdity and the quality of faith which this struggle reveals—this is what makes him a hero.

4

The Lesser Novels of V.S. Naipaul

The four other novels which deserve some consideration are the following :

1. *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958)
2. *Miguel Street* (1959)
3. *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963)
4. *A Bend in the River* (1979)

These novels do not belong to the front rank of English fiction, but they have their merits.

1. THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA (1958)

Comic Exaggeration in the Novel

The Suffrage of Elvira was Naipaul's first political novel. It deals mainly with a successful campaign by a Trinidadian Hindu by the name of Mr. Harbans to win elections as a candidate from Elvira (in Trinidad). Naipaul's mode of presentation in this novel creates a greater sense of immediacy because there is here no narrator to distance the characters and to shape the reader's critical response. (In the earlier novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, there was a narrator by the name of Ralph Singh who told the story in the first person pronoun). In *The Suffrage of Elvira* the characters themselves are given a vitality, an inventiveness, and a flexibility, which make their world much more tangible and real to the reader. What distancing there is in this novel is effected through the comic exaggeration and the element of the highly grotesque and absurd which make Naipaul's representations rather larger than life. So high is the level of comic exaggeration that one cannot take the book as a serious, realistic indictment of a colonial society, but as a superbly humorous blow-up of human flaws and fads.

HIS LESSER NOVELS

The Basic Selfishness and Corruptibility

To the people of Elvira, suffrage means no more than an opportunity for personal gain. It is this basic selfishness and corruptibility that ensures Harbans's return to the Leg. Co. and repeatedly involves the people of Elvira in highly farcical situations. Baksh, who is believed to be in control of the Muslim vote, makes most out of the election. Three times he is bribed: first to support Harbans; then to stand for election himself; and, finally, to withdraw in favour of the "popular candidate". Baksh's nomination necessitates changes in the allocation of election symbols. This highly comic situation becomes yet another example to show that "things were crazily mixed up in Elvira." Baksh's transparent roguery is one of the sources of comic delight in the novel. Then there is Chittaranjan who commands some Hindu and some Spanish votes. In order to support Harbans in the election, Chittaranjan asks for the marriage of Harbans's son to his daughter Nelly Chittaranjan. The bargaining itself is a humorous example of under-statement and *double entendre*.* Yet it becomes soon evident to the reader that Harbans has no intention of fulfilling his part of the agreement; and this makes Chittaranjan's subsequent efforts all the more farcical. To preserve his daughter's "honour" Chittaranjan goes to comically grotesque lengths, but fails. His failure is lucky for Nelly who escapes from the static, decaying world of Indian customs.

The Characterization

Naipaul's mode of portraying his characters suggests how little the candidate matters in the politics of Elvira. The characterization of Harbans is superficial, and he never becomes a really tangible person in our imagination. His moods, for example, are usually indicated by brief narrative statements; and his distinguishing mannerism is referred to only in the first chapter and as a result is soon forgotten by us. In contrast, the portrayal of old Sebastian is very vivid and impressive. Sebastian shows no interest in the election and remains removed from the hustle and bustle of campaigning. But he is so vividly drawn that he attracts greater attention than his contribution to the action justifies. The vividness with which this character has been drawn seems to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to emphasize the barren and absurd elements of life in Elvira. The old, decrepit Sebastian embodies these elements no doubt, but he seems indestructible. At the same time the portrayal of Sebastian suggests that the social condition which Sebastian reflects to some extent is equally unchangeable, that there is no possible escape from a very limited, grotesque, and absurd existence. It is this implication which creates a feeling that all life is meaningless in this novel. Naipaul's obtrusive characterization of Sebastian also induces in the reader a more critical and detached response to the characters than would have been the case if the old

**Double entendre* (Fr.)—a phrase with two meanings, one usually indecent.

man were absent from the novel. Yet such a response does not diminish the reader's delight in the richly comic presentation of self-interest and of petty ambitions and fads which constitute the main theme of the novel.

2. MIGUEL STREET (1959)

The Episodic Design of the Novel

Although this novel was published two years after *The Mystic Masseur*, it was the first of Naipaul's books to be written. Structurally *Miguel Street* differs from the rest of Naipaul's fiction, because it is not really a novel in the usual sense of the word but a series of related sketches. It has an episodic design which reminds us of Charles Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*. Another feature of this novel differentiating it from other books by Naipaul is that the characterizations here show a human sympathy and understanding which are rare in Naipaul's satire. Admittedly there is some distancing: the stories are told in retrospect—after the narrator's experience has prompted his own flight from Trinidad. The narrator, too, can be seen as being sarcastic like the narrator in *The Mystic Masseur*; his reference to Titus Hoyt as a man "born to be an active and important member of a local road board" is a mocking comment on the society. Yet his frequent participation in the action of the novel, and his humane understanding of the people he writes about, make his representations of the people vital and immediate, and encourage in the reader a sympathetic involvement in the lives of the characters.

A Rogues' Gallery

Miguel Street, while more compassionate and less satirical in nature, is really a rogues' gallery of the street people of Port of Spain. It is more like a string of colourful vignettes than a plotted novel. It dramatizes the frustrating meaninglessness of urban poverty. It seems that the only hope is escape; indeed, the narrator flies to the metropolis on the wings of "scholastic success". The most positive aspect of this depressing world is the indomitable spirit which continues to cheer up one character after another. The result is a blend of poignant bitterness and pathos.

Abundance of Comedy in the Novel

And yet *Miguel Street* abounds in comedy. In fact, the sheer buoyancy and comic exuberance of this book and the apparent casualness of its framework reflect the author's delight in the human comedy which he depicts. Repeatedly he draws attention not so much to the fact of failing in one sense or another as to the comic ironies and incongruities associated with it. And even though the party finally comes to an end for every character in the book, their vigorous vitality and resilience arouse the reader's sympathy. The portrayals of B. Wordsworth, Laura, and Hat have a rare pathos which Naipaul succeeds in conveying even through the satiric mode.

The Author's Sympathy for the Characters

Miguel Street is a funny book; eccentricity, failure, inefficiency, and immaturity are gently mocked and shaped into comedy. Dialogue is the author's main instrument for building up his characters. The invective and racy dialect he uses and his choice of suggestive incidents produce funny and disarming personages. As already pointed out, the author's human sympathy for the characters is the major new element in the characterization here as compared to the characterization in Naipaul's two preceding books. The narrator, who is young and immature for the most part, displays a heartfelt concern for the plight of others by withholding his laughter from that of the crowd when he realizes how deeply someone can be hurt. "Big foot's" cowardice, and Laura's incomprehensible love for her eight illegitimate children, are to be exempted from the ridicule of the street. Apparently an unspoken code or propriety leads Hat to punish Boyee for his insensitivity in questioning Laura's despair over her daughter's following in her footsteps. Adding greatly to the story, Hat's point of view complements the narrator's simple-mindedness. Hat is more thoughtful than most of his friends; he is a kind of homespun philosopher whose wisdom fails him in the end. And the fact that he too falls a victim to human frailty makes him all the more meaningful as a character. It may also be pointed out that Ganesh, the narrator of Naipaul's first novel *The Mystic Mas-seur*, reappears in this book, though he makes only a brief appearance.

3. MR. STONE AND THE KNIGHTS COMPANION (1963)

A Retiring Man's Quest For Renewal

The central character in this novel is a middle-aged man called Mr. Stone who has achieved little in life and is now frightened by thoughts of his coming retirement. The novel deals with his quest for renewal in the midst of decay and signs of imminent extinction. Mr. Stone's environment reflects the emptiness and gloom of his life, and the cold fear which in course of time takes possession of him. The story opens in winter, and Mr. Stone's house is described as a cold, dark, empty place. Again and again Naipaul refers to the empty house or to the cold darkness of the empty house. Around Mr. Stone are constant reminders of bareness, decay, and imminent death—Miss Millington, slow, too old for work and too helpless to retire, anticipates Mr. Stone's later sense of "the darkness that was to come".

The English Setting of the Novel

In *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, Naipaul has moved from his native West Indies to an English setting though this is his only novel with an English background and setting. The author proves quite successful in his handling of the English setting. But

the author's point of view shows no change. In fact, Mr. Stone in this novel and Mr. Biswas of the earlier book obviously have much in common. They share certain attitudes to life; they are buffeted about by fate; and they achieve little in their lives. It is the style of the novels which shows interesting differences in the technique and approach of the author. Mr. Stone's life is exceptionally well-ordered, unlike that of Mr. Biswas; and the novel itself is also well-ordered, with a clear structure. The creative exuberance of the earlier novel (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) has here been carefully subdued to the requirements of a pattern and a moral, even though the author's talent for eccentric characterization is not altogether absent from here. *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* portrays a crucial change in the life of an ageing librarian, in which a very late marriage and the consequent emotional upheaval lead him to a sudden flash of insight into human relations; and the production of an idea. Then, as the idea is put into action, Mr. Stone sees it becoming distorted and changed, loses interest in the idea as well as in his marriage, and returns easily to his original state.

Mr. Stone's Idea, "Licked Into Shape"

When Mr. Stone takes his wife on a late honeymoon to Cornwall, he witnesses a scene which drives him to a silent rage. He sees a workman just pensioned off, useless, worn out, helpless, and in the grip of his wife and some other women. Once this workman had his work; now he is in the power of others, and has become a mere thing just because he has retired and has become a pensioner. Mr. Stone then rushes back to London, shuts himself in his room, and conceives a bold idea. He conceives the project of the *Knights Companion* and then succeeds in selling the idea to the head of his firm. It is simply that the firm should send out visitors to its pensioned employees in order to make them feel that they are still wanted and not useless. Mr. Stone then watches his idea "licked into shape" by a remarkable cad called Whymper, the public relations officer of the firm. Whymper is a man tormented by dozens of new ideas and by uncontrollable lust. Whymper bursts into Mr. Stone's life, turns everything upside down and, having made a success of the idea for his own personal gain, leaves the firm for bigger and better things and seduces Mr. Stone's very unattractive niece into the bargain. We leave Mr. Stone fulfilled, and yet unfulfilled, because he sees that the beauty of his idea has been ruined by its realization. He comes to the following conclusion: "Nothing pure ought to be exposed, nothing that came from the heart. All action and all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth."

The Quality of Human Perseverance

As in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a notable emphasis is placed in this novel also on the quality of human perseverance. Mr. Stone's world is darker than Mr. Biswas's; but, in spite of physical suffering

and defeat of both these men, they both rise in the end above their predicaments. In view of the continual suffering of the two men and the obvious hints that more problems lie ahead, neither of these two novels can be regarded as optimistic; and yet both indicate that there is a way for human beings to succeed in this absurd life.

There are many brilliantly observed scenes (Tomlinsons' parties, for instance) and many satisfying insights into the English middle-class social order in this novel.

4. A BEND IN THE RIVER (1979)

A Novel Tracing the Protagonist's Relationships With Others

This novel, like several others by Naipaul, follows the mode of the first-person narration. The narrator in this case is a trader and store-keeper Salim, a Muslim from the east coast of Africa. Salim's family, of Indian origin, had been settled there for centuries. Salim buys a small business in a town in a French-speaking Central African State, and establishes himself there. The novel traces his personal relationships: his relationship with his servant Metty who is the son of slaves from the coast; his relationship with the handsome, self-absorbed Indian couple Mahesh and Shoba, who win the Bigburger franchise; his relationship with the reputed witch Zabeth and her lycee-educated* son Ferdinand, who becomes Commissioner and rescues Salim from persecution in the last chapter; his relationship with Indar, his English-university-educated boyhood friend; his relationship with Nazruddin, a businessman from the coast who becomes a property-owner in Gloucester Road in London; his relationship with Father Huisman whose knowledge of, and respect for, African religion ends in his assassination; and his relationship with Raymond, white historian of Africa and adviser to the President and his wife Yvett, with whom Salim has a violently sexual affair. The novel also describes the progress of the African State itself, through revolution, counter-revolution, the nationalization of property (including Salim's), prosperity, and bloodshed, as the President tries to combine new technology and new mythology in his image of the new Africa. The novel, like several others by Naipaul, is predominantly pessimistic in tone. It is also marked by something resembling Joseph Conrad's sense of the futility and corruptibility of human endeavour. The novel may be regarded as an inspiring investigation of the price that has to be paid for change. Some small comfort is offered to the reader through the survival instincts of some of the characters.

**Lycee-educated*—The word "lycee" means a public secondary school in France.

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“A House for Mr. Biswas ”: An Introduction

Trinidad, the Setting of the Novel. The Period Covered : 1905—1951

The story of this novel is set in Trinidad, where V.S. Naipaul was born but from where he emigrated to England to study at Oxford University and subsequently to settle down there permanently. Trinidad is one of the group of islands together known as the West Indies. Like the other islands of this group, Trinidad is situated in the Caribbean Sea. Trinidad was originally a Spanish colony. Later, as a result of the Anglo-Spanish war, this territory became part of the British Empire. In course of time, Trinidad was allowed to have a legislative council of its own, headed by a governor appointed by the British government. In 1962, Trinidad became an independent country but chose to remain in the Commonwealth (of which our own country also continues to be a member). Trinidad has a mixed population. There are the white people who include descendants of the English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese settlers. Then there are the coloured people who are chiefly the native Africans, the descendants of the Negro slaves, and there are the Indians, the descendants of those who went from this country to Trinidad to work as labourers in the sugarcane fields. Negro slavery in Trinidad was abolished in 1834; and as the Negroes were no longer prepared to work in the sugarcane fields, Indian labourers began to be imported into Trinidad after 1834. Naipaul's own grandfather was one of those who had gone from India to Trinidad to work as labourers, though Naipaul's father improved the family fortunes and status by becoming a writer, and afterwards Naipaul himself achieved eminence as a novelist and journalist. The story of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is set partly in the countryside of Trinidad and partly in the capital city, Port of Spain. With the exception of *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* and *A Bend in the River*, all other novels of Naipaul up to date have this West Indian background and setting.

Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion has London as its setting, while *A Bend in the River* is set in a French-speaking African State. As most of his novels have been set in the West Indies, Naipaul has sometimes been regarded as a regional novelist, though the universal elements in his fiction have duly been recognized. The countryside setting of *A House for Mr. Biswas* takes us to such villages as Parrot Trace, Pagotes, Arwacas, The Chase, Green Vale, and Shorthills; while the urban setting takes us to Port of Spain which is the capital of Trinidad. In Trinidad the main occupation of the people is agriculture. Sugar, cocoa, coconut, and citrus fruits are the chief products. Shipping and petroleum are the principal industries of the island. The deep water harbour of Port of Spain, which was opened in 1940, is the most important harbour in the West Indies. Sites for military bases were leased by the British government to the United States in 1941 for a period of ninety-nine years. American construction in, and occupation of, these areas brought prosperity to the island. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* there is a reference to this prosperity resulting from the arrival of Americans in the island. Govind, who becomes a taxi-driver in Port of Spain, begins to earn a lot of money from his American passengers. The events of this novel cover the forty-six years of Mr. Biswas's life, from about 1905 to 1951. Both World War I and World War II were fought during this period.

The Tulsi Family, Living at Hanuman House

A House for Mr. Biswas is chiefly the story of Mr. Mohun Biswas who comes of a humble peasant family but who gets married into a rich, land-owning family chiefly because of the superior Brahmin cast to which he belongs and to which that family also belongs. The family into which Mr. Biswas gets married is known as the Tulsi family, the head of which was Pundit Tulsi who had emigrated from India to Trinidad, not as a labourer but as a well-to-do Indian who had decided to settle down in Trinidad. However, when the story opens, Pundit Tulsi has been dead for some time, having been killed in a motor accident. The head of the family is now his widow, Mrs. Tulsi, who lives with her large family consisting of two sons, a dozen or more daughters, a number of her sons-in-law, and many grand-children. The family lives at Hanuman House, situated in the village of Arwacas. The family owns not only this house, but also other houses situated at various other places; and it owns also agricultural land, and a country estate at a place called Green Vale, and another at a place called Shorthills. After having lived at Hanuman House for many years, the Tulsi family moves to its estate in Shorthills and then to its house in Port of Spain. The Tulsi family and Hanuman House represent the old Hindu culture now coming under the influence of the alien western culture. The Tulsi family is very orthodox, but its orthodoxy begins to crumble with the onset of western influences. Mrs. Tulsi, in ruling over her family, is helped in her task by Seth, her dead husband's brother. Seth and his wife

Padma also live in Hanuman House where they enjoy a status as high as that of Mrs. Tulsi herself. In course of time, however, a rift takes place between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth so that Seth moves out of Hanuman House to live separately.

Satirical Portrayals of Characters . A Realistic Novel

The chief portagonist in this novel is, as already pointed out, Mr. Mohun Biswas. The other important figures in the story are his wife Shama and his children, his mother-in-law Mrs. Tulsi, Shama's uncle Seth, and Shama's brothers, Shekhar and Owad. There are a dozen or more subsidiary figures in the novel also. Although the main story in the novel has some tragic implications, and although there are a number of deeply moving and poignant scenes, there is an abundance of comedy in the book. The whole story has in fact been told in a humorous vein punctuated occasionally by an incident or episode marked by pathos. Most of the characters have been portrayed satirically. The chief targets of satire are Mrs. Tulsi, Shekhar, Owad, Govind, Hari, and Chinta. There are touches of satire in the portrayal of Mr. Biswas and his wife Shama also. Other targets of satire are Bhandat and his two sons Jagdat and Rabidat. Apart from the vivid portrayals of characters and the rich comedy, the novel contains also brief but graphic descriptions of places and scenery. Realism is the keynote of this novel. There is nothing fantastic or fanciful here, and nothing divorced from the realities of life.

A Synopsis of the Novel

The title of the novel is significant and appropriate. The book contains the story of Mr. Mohun Biswas's struggle to acquire a house of his own; and he does eventually become the proud owner of a house even though the house has been mortgaged because Mr. Biswas did not have enough money for the purchase of the house and had to borrow quite a big sum from a relation of his. The story covers the entire span of the life of Mr. Biswas from the time of his birth to the time of his death at the age of forty-six. The birth of Mr. Biwas is accompanied by several bad omens. The pundit who reads the boy's future predicts that he will prove to be unlucky and that he will grow into a spendthrift, a lecher, and a liar. Unlucky Mr. Biswas surely proves to be; but he does not become a spendthrift or a lecher or a liar. After certain initial disappointments and setbacks, Mr. Biswas becomes a sign-painter and it is this work of sign-painting which takes him to Hanuman House, where he feels attracted by Shama, one of the fourteen daughters of Mrs. Tulsi. Mr. Biswas is then hustled into a marriage with Shama. He has no means of livelihood, and he has no residential accommodation for himself and his wife. But Mrs. Tulsi and Seth knew these facts about Mr. Biswas and they yet accepted him as a son-in-law because they wanted

him to live at Hanuman House like several other sons-in-law who had previously been married to the Tulsi daughters. Mr. Biswas finds that he has to lead a life of subservience not only to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth but also to the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi and to certain other members of the family. Being an independent-minded man with a lot of self-respect, he rebels against this state of affairs. Mr. Biswas's rebellion against Hanuman House and all that it stands for constitutes the main substance of the novel. As he finds it impossible to live under the same roof with Mrs. Tulsi and Seth and the others, he is sent to take charge of the Tulsi food-shop in a village called The Chase. He proves a failure as a shopkeeper and, instead of making any money, runs into debt as a result of the unfortunate litigation which he had embarked upon against one of his customers. Mr. Biswas is then sent to the Tulsi estate at Green Vale where he has to work as a supervisor to superintend the work of the labourers. Here Mr. Biswas thinks of building a house of his own. He does start building a house but is unable to complete it because of shortage of funds. By now he has become the father of three children, the eldest being a daughter called Savi, the next being a son named Anand, and the next being again a daughter called Myna. Mr. Biswas now moves into the house which he has built even though it has remained incomplete. He thinks that he might feel a little more cheerful by living in a house of which he is the owner. But he proves wrong in his calculations. There is a streak of morbidity in his nature. This morbidity deepens when he realizes that he has achieved nothing in life; and this morbidity is further aggravated by his loneliness because Shama spends many days at a time with her mother and sisters at Hanuman House while Mr. Biswas has to attend to his duties at Green Vale. Marriage has not brought any happiness to Mr. Biswas because, in all his discussions with Shama about the Tulsi family, she invariably takes the side of her family. On many occasions there has been a lot of unpleasantness between Mr. Biswas and Shama. He tries the experiment of bringing first Savi and later Anand to stay with him at Green Vale, but the experiment does not yield any good results. Mr. Biswas's depression now begins to become more and more acute, till it takes the form of a real malady. He begins to be haunted by fears about his future and he begins to be troubled by many strange questionings. He becomes more or less a psychopath. One night when a storm is blowing and when it is raining heavily, he suffers a mental collapse and falls gravely ill. His son Anand also happens to be staying with him at this time. News of his illness is immediately carried to the Tulsi family by some of the labourers, and he is then removed to Hanuman House. At Hanuman House Mr. Biswas is well looked after and is nursed back to health. However, the prospect of having to live at Hanuman House permanently is not relished by him. He simply cannot lead a life of dependence and servility. And so he sets out for the capital city, Port of Spain. In Port of Spain he lives for some time with his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand.

Then he gets a job with a newspaper called the *Trinidad Sentinel*. At the same time he is offered accommodation by Mrs. Tulsi in a house which she had purchased for herself and her son Owad in the capital city. Mr. Biswas sends for his family and takes up residence in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. By now a rift has taken place between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth; and Mrs. Tulsi decides to move to her estate at Shorthills. The entire Tulsi family now shifts to Shorthills, a place which is situated to the north-east of Port of Spain, among the mountains of the northern range. But Shorthills is not very far from Port of Spain. Mrs. Tulsi's grand-children now join schools in the city of Port of Spain, though they find it a very inconvenient to have to travel daily all the way from shorthills to Port of Spain. Mrs. Tulsi now urges Mr. Biswas also to join her and the others at Shorthills; and Mr. Biswas complies. At Shorthills Mr. Biswas again builds a house of his own and moves into it with his family. However, as ill luck would have it, this house catches fire and is burned down. After spending some more time with Mrs. Tulsi in her house, he and his family again shift to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Mr. Biswas now gets another job. He resigns his newspaper job as a reporter and becomes a Community Welfare Officer in government service. He is now able to buy a car with the money which is advanced to him as a long-term loan by the government department which has appointed him to his new post. Now another development takes place. Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's younger son, who had gone to England for his medical studies, returns after an eight-year stay in that country. Mr. Biswas finds himself very uncomfortable in Mrs. Tulsi's house which has now become overcrowded and even more noisy than before. He quarrels with both Mrs. Tulsi and Owad, and decides to quit Mrs. Tulsi's house. But he has no house to which he can shift from here. Happening to meet a solicitor's clerk who wants to dispose of his house which is situated in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas decides to buy this house. He has got only one thousand and two hundred dollars with him, while the solicitor's clerk demands five thousand five hundred dollars for his house. Mr. Biswas borrows four thousand dollars from his uncle Ajodha, and buys the house in Sikkim Street. He then moves with his family into the house of which he has become the owner. He now heaves a sign of relief because he has a house of his own and because he has finally been liberated from the stranglehold of Mrs. Tulsi. In the meantime, both his daughter Savi and his son Anand go abroad on scholarships. Anand is, however, sending gloomy letters to his father. Some of Mr. Biswas's old fears return to him. The morbid streak in his nature reasserts itself. Another development too has not been of a very cheering kind. The department where he worked is abolished by the government; and Mr. Biswas has to go back to the *Trinidad Sentinel* to resume his old job. One day he gets a heart-attack and has to spend a month in hospital. After recovering from his illness he takes up his newspaper job again but then he gets another heart-attack which makes it necessary for him to spend six weeks more in hospital. The

Trinidad Sentinel now puts Mr. Biswas on half pay. Savi returns from abroad and gets a very good job. Her presence in the house does have a cheering effect on Mr. Biswas, but his son Anand is still a cause of disappointment to him. One day his newspaper publishes a report about his death in the following words : "Journalist Dies Suddenly". All Shama's relations come to share her grief. Mr. Biswas is cremated on the banks of a muddy stream. Afterwards, Shama's relatives go back to their respective homes, while Shama and her children go back to their empty house in Sikkim Street. Mr. Biswas has died at the early age of forty-six. But he has died as an owner of a house where he had been able to live with self-respect and dignity, though not for long.

The Two Themes of the Novel

Besides giving us this account of the adventures and experiences of Mr. Biswas, the novel also describes the process by which the Tulsi family, once united, now disintegrates under the influence of the western culture and of urban life. Indeed, the dissolution of the Tulsi family is one of the leading themes of the novel. While the life-story of Mr. Biswas shows a self-respecting individual's rebellion against tyranny, the account of what happens to the Tulsi family as a whole shows the interaction of two cultures, the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi family and the alien western culture as represented by the city of Port of Spain and by such individuals as Dorothy, the Christian girl whom Shekhar marries, and Dorothy's cousin whom Owad subsequently marries. The interaction between these two cultures is designed to show that the old Hindu culture which Indian Hindus had taken with them to Trinidad cannot long withstand the influence of the alien western culture. Of course, the old Hindu culture is not completely absorbed by the western culture, but it is certainly weakened and undermined.

Naipaul's Own Comment On This Novel

In a Foreword to an edition of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul has said that, of all his books, this novel is the one which is closest to him. According to the view expressed by Naipaul in this Foreword, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the most personal novel which he has written. It is a novel which he created out of what he saw and felt as a child. Naipaul also says in this Foreword that this novel contains some of his funniest writing. He says further that he began as a comic writer and that he still considers himself to be a comic writer. "In middle age now, I have no higher literary ambition than to write a piece of comedy that might complement or match this early book", says Naipaul with reference to this novel. Naipaul further tells us in this Foreword that *A House for Mr. Biswas* took him three years to write. By the time he came to the end of his writing of it, he knew the whole book by heart; but once the labour of writing had ended the book began to recede from his

mind and he found that he was unwilling to re-enter the world which he had created, unwilling to expose himself again to the emotions that lay below the comedy. "I became nervous of the book", he says. In other words, although *A House for Mr. Biswas* is apparently a comedy, there is an undercurrent of seriousness and gravity in the writing. And, anyone who has gone through the novel carefully will agree that the serious and tragic implications of the story continue to haunt our minds long after the comedy of the book has been forgotten. When Naipaul wrote this novel, he was staying in a rented flat on Streatham Hill to the south of the river Thames in north London. At this place he was able to have the solitude and the time necessary for the writing of this book. The storm scene in the novel (in the chapter called "Green Vale"), with black, biting ants, was written by Naipaul with the curtains of his room drawn, and by candle-light, because he wanted to create the necessary atmosphere and wanted to remind himself of the moving shadows thrown by the oil-lamps of the days of his childhood. After Naipaul had completed writing this novel, he went abroad for seven months. At the end of his travels, he went back to the Streatham Hill house where he stayed for nine months more to write a book about his travels. But the book of travels was an entirely different kind of writing from *A House for Mr. Biswas* which, despite its autobiographical elements, is a work of fiction. Naipaul recalls that the time spent by him on this novel on Streatham Hill remains "the most consuming, the most fulfilled, the happiest years" of his life. He refers to this period of his life as his Garden of Eden.

“A House for Mr. Biswas” : The Story of the Novel

Birth; Parentage; Father's Death

Mr. Mohun Biswas was born in a village of Trinidad. He was born of humble parents, his maternal grandfather having emigrated to Trinidad from India to work on a sugar-estate. Mr. Biswas was born at the hour of midnight which was not thought to be an auspicious hour. Besides, he was born in the wrong way and was found to have six fingers. The pundit, who was called to read the boy's future, said that the boy would grow into a lecher, a spendthrift, and a liar. The pundit's advice was that the boy should be kept away from trees and from water. The midwife attending upon the birth of the boy made the prediction that the boy would eat up his own mother and father. Mr. Biswas really ate up his father because the father got drowned one day in the village pond while trying to trace his son who was missing but who was actually hiding under a bed at home. Mr. Biswas does not grow up to be spendthrift, a liar, or a lecher, but he does prove to be an unlucky person in many ways. Some time after the death of Mr. Biswas's father, the family is compelled by circumstances to split. Mr. Biswas's two elder brothers are sent away to a distant place to work on a sugar-estate; his sister Dehuti is sent to the house of her aunt Tara at Pagotes to work as a domestic servant; Mr. Biswas and his mother move also to Pagotes where Tara's husband owns a house, but they are given some accommodation by Tara in another house which also belongs to her husband.

Schooling

Mr. Biswas is admitted to the Canadian Mission School where he receives instruction from a teacher by the name of Lal. Lal was originally a low-caste Hindu but he had been converted to Presbyterianism, a sect of Christianity. At school Mr. Biswas finds that he has entered a new world where he has to learn arithmetic and

study various other branches of knowledge. Among his fellow-students there is a Christian boy by the name of Alec with whom Mr. Biswas becomes quite friendly. In Alec's company Mr. Biswas plays all the pranks in which boys generally indulge. In Alec's company he lays six-inch nails on the railway track at the back of the Main Road in order to have them flattened so as to make knives and bayonets of them. Together the two boys go to the Pagotes river and smoke their first cigarettes. They tear off their shirt-buttons and exchange them for marbles. At school they sit at the same desk, talk, are flogged, and separated; but they always come together again. It is through this association that Mr. Biswas discovers his talent for lettering. His lettering proves to be so nice that the teacher calls him a sign-painter, and a sign-painter Mr. Biswas actually becomes afterwards. Mr. Biswas remains at this school for nearly six years. During this time he seldom goes to Tara's house where his sister Dehuti is working as a maid-servant. He goes to Tara's house only when a religious ceremony is held there and when some Brahmins are needed to be fed by Tara. On such occasions Mr. Biswas is treated with much regard because he is a Brahmin; and yet as soon as the ceremony is over and he has received his share of money and clothing, he becomes once more a labourer's son. In the birth certificate which his mother Bipti had obtained from the Commissioner of Oaths, one of the entries shows Mr. Biswas to be the son of a labourer. Tara's husband, Ajodha, is keenly interested in a newspaper feature called "That Body of Yours." Ajodha sometimes summons Mr. Biswas to his house and asks him to read out that column to him. This daily column deals with a different disease of the human body everyday. Ajodha pays Mr. Biswas a penny for every reading. Thus whenever Mr. Biswas goes to Tara's house it is either as a Brahmin to be fed at a religious ceremony or as a reader to read out a newspaper column to Tara's husband at a penny a day.

As an Apprentice to Pundit Jairam

Just when Mr. Biswas has begun to learn stocks and shares in arithmetic, he is taken out of school by Tara and is put under the charge of a Hindu priest in order to be groomed as a pundit. Mr. Biswas's instructor is a man called Pundit Jairam. Pundit Jairam begins to teach the young boy Hindi, and introduces him to the more important scriptures, instructing him also in various ceremonies. Morning and evening, under Pundit Jairam's supervision, Mr. Biswas performs the *puja* for his instructor's whole family. Pundit Jairam also begins to take Mr. Biswas with him on his professional visits, with the result that Mr. Biswas becomes an object of considerable regard in Tara's house. At the ceremonies which Mr. Biswas attends as Pundit Jairam's assistant, he is given a seat next to his boss; and when Jairam has over-eaten himself, it is Mr. Biswas who mixes the bicarbonate of soda for him. Mr. Biswas has also to bring home all the gifts which Jairam receives. On one occasion Mr. Biswas carries

home a large bunch of bananas which Jairam has received as a gift. This bunch is hung in the kitchen to ripen. But one day when Jairam and his wife have gone out, Mr. Biswas picks two bananas and eats them. On his return Jairam detects the theft and, to punish Mr. Biswas, he forces the young man to eat all the remaining bananas also. As a result, Mr. Biswas begins to feel sick and his stomach is upset. Subsequently, he begins habitually to suffer from constipation, and the call comes to him at unpredictable times. One night Mr. Biswas has no alternative but to relieve himself on a handkerchief which he then throws out of the window upon a tree below. This tree has always been regarded by Jairam as holy. On discovering what Mr. Biswas had done during the night, Jairam flies into a rage and turns him out of his house. In this way Mr. Biswas's apprenticeship to Pundit Jairam comes to an end. When Mr. Biswas returns home to his mother Bipti at Pagotes, she rebukes him for his misconduct which has led to his dismissal from Pundit Jairam's house. Mr. Biswas feels very hurt by his mother's rebuke but, thirty years later, when he writes a poem addressed to his mother, he does not make any mention of his disappointment with his mother or his grievance against her for her having rebuked him. The passing of time naturally heals his wound.

As an Assistant At A Rum-Shop

Mr. Biswas now goes to his aunt Tara to find out if she would help him in his state of unemployment and wretchedness. Tara receives him with considerable sympathy. She sends him to her husband's rum-shop which is being run by her husband's brother, Bhandat. Working at the rum-shop is a new experience for Mr. Biswas. He finds that Bhandat is a heavy drunkard and is in the habit of beating his wife. Bhandat is also rumoured to be keeping a mistress belonging to a different community. Furthermore, Mr. Biswas discovers that Bhandat is cheating his customers by giving them less than the full measure of the drinks ordered by them in the shop. Bhandat is living with his wife and two sons in a two-room house, and Mr. Biswas has to sleep with Bhandat's two sons on a hard mattress on the floor. From his wages, Mr. Biswas begins to give one dollar a month to his mother Bipti whom he goes to see twice a week when the shop is closed. He also visits Tara occasionally. On one of these visits, he finds twenty volumes of an encyclopaedia which Ajodha had obtained from an American travelling salesman. Sometimes on these visits Mr. Biswas reads out to Ajodha the newspaper column called "That Body of Yours", receiving a penny for his labour as he used to do previously. And thereafter he reads as much as he can from the encyclopaedia for his own benefit. One day Mr. Biswas is unjustly accused by Bhandat of having stolen a dollar from his pocket and is given a beating by him. Bhandat then turns Mr. Biswas out of his house and Mr. Biswas has no alternative but to go back to Bipti. Bipti again scolds him, saying that she has no luck with her children.

Out of Work. A Meeting With His Sister Dehuti

Mr. Biswas now thinks of securing a job somewhere else. He sets out to look for one. He passes many shops, including those of a tailor, a barber, an undertaker, a dry-goods seller and so on, but none of these trades seems to interest him. He returns home to the back trace where his mother has been living ever since his father's death. Bipti suggests that he should go and make up with Tara from whose rum-shop he had been driven away, but Mr. Biswas says that he would rather kill himself. In an angry mood, Mr. Biswas goes out and keeps walking along the Main Road. Several miles away from Pagotes, he suddenly sees Ramchand, the young ex-servant of Tara. Ramchand is the boy with whom Mr. Biswas's sister Dehuti had run away and whom she had married. Ramchand takes Mr. Biswas to his house to meet Dehuti. Dehuti has now got a child also. Ramchand gives Mr. Biswas some news about Mr. Biswas's two brothers, Pratap and Prasad. But Mr. Biswas derives no pleasure at all from his visit to his sister's house.

As a Signboard-Painter

Mr. Biswas now happens to meet his old school-friend, Alec. Alec has become a professional signboard-painter. Mr. Biswas enters into a working partnership with Alec. As Mr. Biswas has a very good handwriting, he too now begins to undertake casual work as a signboard-painter. Mr. Biswas's new work is satisfying no doubt, but it comes irregularly. Alec wanders from district to district, sometimes working, sometimes not working, so that the partnership is often interrupted by periods of idleness. There are many weeks when Mr. Biswas finds himself altogether out of work, though he gets plenty of work when Christmas comes. In the meanwhile, his love of reading develops and he goes through all the novels which he can find at the bookstalls of Pagotes. He feels particularly interested in the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. His mother now wants him to get married but he says that he would never get married as long as he has no secure job and no decent accommodation to live in. His two brothers have by now got married. Mr. Biswas now gets interested in the novels and other writings of Samuel Smiles. He also buys some elementary books on science, particularly on electricity; but he has to give up this line of reading because he cannot obtain the electrical equipment which he needs to learn some practical skill. As his sign-painting does not bring him enough money, he becomes a conductor on one of Ajodha's buses. Then one day he goes to Hanuman House at Arwacas where he is asked to paint signs for the Tulsi Store, which is situated on the ground floor of Hanuman House.

Married to Shama, a Daughter of Mrs Tulsi

While painting signs at the Tulsi Store, Mr. Biswas happens to see a sixteen-year old shop-assistant by the name of Shama. He feels attracted by this girl and writes a note to her. The note bears

the following words : "I love you and I want to talk to you." Mr. Biswas puts the note under a piece of cloth on the counter where Shama generally serves the customers. However, this note falls into the hands of Shama's mother, Mrs. Tulsi who is the owner of Hanuman House and of the Tulsi Store. Mrs. Tulsi is a rich and orthodox widow owning a lot of property. She runs her house and her store with the active collaboration of her dead husband's brother by the name of Seth. Mrs. Tulsi has a large number of daughters all of whom, with the exception of Shama, are already married. Most of her daughters and their husbands are living in Hanuman House under her patronage and the patronage of Seth. All the daughters and the sons-in-law are maintained by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, and they all have to do their share of work in the house, in the store, and on the estates belonging to Mrs. Tulsi. Together Mrs. Tulsi and Seth decide to give Shama in marriage to Mr. Biswas on the ground that Mr. Biswas had written a love-letter to her. Although Mr. Biswas is a poor young man, coming from a humble family, yet the fact that he is a Brahmin by caste goes strongly in his favour. Mr. Biswas had not written the love-letter with any idea of getting married to Shama. But now he is almost coerced into marrying Shama by the combined pressure of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. Mr. Biswas feels sorely disappointed when he finds that he has been given no dowry at all. In fact, even the ceremony of marriage has not been performed in the traditional manner which would have cost Mrs. Tulsi a good deal of money. The marriage is solemnized at the office of the registrar where only a small fee has to be paid. Mr. Biswas now joins the ranks of the other sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi and begins to live in Hanuman House.

Under the Influence of Arya Samaj

Mr. Biswas finds himself a complete misfit in Mrs. Tulsi's household which is being managed by Mrs. Tulsi with the active assistance of Seth. Mr. Biswas resumes his sign-painting and spends as much of his time as he can away from Hanuman House. One day he meets another under-employed man like himself. This man is Misir. Misir is working as the Arwacas correspondent of a newspaper called the *Trinidad Sentinel*. With him, Mr. Biswas discusses many subjects, such as employment opportunities, Hinduism, and India. Misir introduces him to a Hindu missionary who has come from India to Trinidad to preach the views of Arya Samaj. Under the influence of that missionary, Mr. Biswas adopts the progressive and unorthodox views preached by him.

The Disharmony Between Mr. Biswas and His Wife

Mr. Biswas's married life does not prove to be happy. He finds it impossible to develop any intimacy with Shama. In fact, they both begin to feel antagonistic towards each other. Mr. Biswas often taunts her on the shortcomings of her family, while she too speaks to him with an under-current of bitterness. He refers to her

two brothers as "the little gods", to Seth as "the big boss", and to Mrs. Tulsi as "the old queen", then as "the old hen", and next as "the old cow". Shama says that nobody had particularly asked him to get married into the Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas retorts that there is no reason at all for Shama to feel proud of her family because in his opinion it is not a family at all. He says that he hopes one day to spit on some of the members of this family. To this, Shama replies that no member of the Tulsi family would care even to spit on any member of his family which, she says, is far inferior to the Tulsi family. Having lost his identity to a great extent and being a man of an independent nature, Mr. Biswas finds his life in Hanuman House to be one of great stress and strain.

A Quarrel Between Mr. Biswas and the Tulsis

One day one of the Tulsi sons-in-law by the name of Govind suggests to Mr. Biswas that he should give up his sign-painting and should become a supervisor on the Tulsi estate where Seth would be his boss. Mr. Biswas replies that he cannot give up his independence and that his motto in life is ; "Paddle your own canoe." Mr. Biswas then says that the Tulsis are blood-suckers and that he would rather catch crabs or sell coconuts than work under any of the Tulsis. Mr. Biswas also speaks in mocking tones about all the principal members of the Tulsi family—about Mrs. Tulsi, about her two sons and about Seth. Govind communicates to Seth all that Mr. Biswas has said. Mr. Biswas is then summoned by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi and is accused of ingratitude. Mrs. Tulsi's younger son Owad says that Mr. Biswas must apologize to his mother for having spoken disparagingly about the Tulsi family. At this Mr. Biswas loses his temper and shouts that they can all go to hell and that he is not going to apologize to anybody. Mr. Biswas then threatens to leave Hanuman House but is persuaded to stay on by Seth's wife Padma and Govind's wife Chinta.

Mr. Biswas, Thrashed For His Misconduct

Mr. Biswas now becomes even more critical of the Tulsi household. He makes all sorts of sarcastic remarks about the members of the Tulsi clan. He says that Shama's two brothers look like monkeys, and that Hanuman House is a real zoo where all kinds of animals dwell. He refers to Hari, one of the Tulsi sons-in-law, as "the constipated holy man". In retaliation Shama calls Mr. Biswas a "barking puppy dog". Mr. Biswas then shocks the whole Tulsi household by advocating the unorthodox views and ideas of Arya Samaj. He also criticizes the two sons of Mr. Tulsi for wearing crucifixes when they profess to be orthodox Hindus. He now also describes Mrs. Tulsi as a "she-fox", thus further offending Shama. One day Mr. Biswas goes to the length of throwing a plateful of food from the window upon the head of Mrs. Tulsi's younger son

Owad and also gargling upon Owad's head. Not being able to tolerate this kind of gross misbehaviour, Govind (one of the Tulsi sons-in-law) seizes Mr. Biswas and gives him several powerful blows in order to punish him for his misbehaviour. But the matter does not end here. The next morning Mr. Biswas is summoned by Seth who tells him that the family can no longer tolerate Mr. Biswas in the house. Seth then tells him that it has been decided to send him to a village called The Chase to take charge of the Tulsi food-shop there. Shama is pregnant at this time.

Mr. Biswas as a Shopkeeper at The Chase

Soon after settling down at The Chase, Shama suggests that they should hold a house-blessing ceremony. Mr. Biswas reluctantly agrees. One of the Tulsi sons-in-law, Hari, who generally functions as the family priest, is invited to come and perform the house-blessing ceremony. All the inmates of Hanuman House are invited to attend the function. The children too come in large numbers to participate in it. The children do a lot of damage to the bottles in the shop, and Mr. Biswas has to bear the loss. Mr. Biswas's hostility to the Tulsi family has not diminished one bit. The shop at The Chase does not flourish because Mr. Biswas has to give credit to his customers who afterwards stop coming to the shop so as to evade the payment of their bills. Shama gives birth to a daughter who is given the name Savi by Seth. Mr. Biswas resents the fact of a name having been given to his daughter by Seth without any consultation with him. He also resents the fact that in the birth certificate of this daughter his occupation has been shown as that of a labourer instead of a shop-proprietor or shopkeeper. Three years later, Shama gives birth to another child, this time a boy, who is given the name Anand, again by Seth.

A Change in His Attitude to Hanuman House

Mr. Biswas's attitude to Hanuman House now undergoes a certain change. He begins to realize that Hanuman House is not a chaotic place as he had thought. He finds that there is a regular hierarchy in the Tulsi household with Mrs. Tulsi and Seth at the top, followed by Padma, Chinta, Shama and others with Mr. Biswas himself at the bottom. Hanuman House now seems to him a world more real than The Chase. Hanuman House is a place where his wife and children can always go and stay in comfort. Hanuman House is a place of refuge in times of difficulty. And so he now starts going to Hanuman House regularly. His wife Shama and the children have already been paying frequent visits to Hanuman House and staying there for long or short periods.

An End to Shopkeeping

A serious quarrel now takes place between Mr. Biswas and Shama because Shama no longer wishes to live at The Chase.

Meanwhile Shama gives birth to yet another child, this time a daughter who is given the name of Myna. Mr. Biswas, who had got entangled in some litigation with a customer who had not paid his bills, suffers a heavy financial loss because the man, on whom he had served a legal notice through a lawyer, is able to turn the tables upon Mr. Biswas. In view of this development, Seth suggests that Mr. Biswas should get the shop insured and then burn it in order to claim compensation from the insurance company. Mr. Biswas refuses to accept this suggestion and quits the shop. Subsequently, Seth himself gets the shop insured and has it burned down. Seth then passes on the amount of the compensation paid by the insurance company to Mr. Biswas.

At Green Vale. A Present For Savi

Seth and Mrs. Tulsi now send Mr. Biswas to work as an overseer at a place called Green Vale where he and his family are given a room in the barracks. Mr. Biswas is to be paid a salary of twenty-five dollars a month. Every Saturday Seth comes to Green Vale to inspect the work done by the labourers under Mr. Biswas and to pay them their wages. Mr. Biswas feels very dissatisfied with his work at Green Vale and keeps blaming Shama and the Tulsi family for all his difficulties. He tells Shama that she and her family have got him into this arduous job. Shama often goes to stay at Hanuman House, taking the children with her. On one occasion at Christmas time Mr. Biswas buys a doll's house as a present for his daughter Savi. As he gives no presents to the other children in the house, all the sisters of Shama turn hostile to him for having ignored their children. Mrs. Tulsi scolds Mr. Biswas for having violated the family convention according to which all the children are to be treated equally. Feeling upset by the taunts of her sisters, Shama breaks the doll's house into pieces and throws it on a heap of rubbish. Mr. Biswas feels enraged by this destructive action of Shama's. As a protest he takes Savi with him to Green Vale to live there. When Mr. Biswas goes out to work, Savi has to stay alone in his room in the barracks. In the evenings and at night he reads out to her from some novel or explains to her the views of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. Sometimes he begins muttering to himself that he had been trapped by the Tulsi family into marrying Shama and that he now finds himself "in a hole". After a week, Shama comes to Green Vale with the other children and then takes away Savi with her because Savi's school is to reopen after the holidays.

A House of His Own At Green Vale

Mr. Biswas has now to spend a lonely time at Green Vale. Every night he bolts himself in his room but he finds no peace. In fact, he is now afflicted by fears of all kinds. He develops a morbid outlook upon life and begins to harbour all kinds of apprehensions about his future. When he goes on a visit to Hanuman House, he

has some unpleasantness with Chinta. On one occasion he learns that his son Anand has been punished at school for some misdemeanour. Mr. Biswas now decides to build a house of his own at Green Vale. He engages a carpenter by the name of Mr. Maclean ; and the construction of the house begins. However, the house remains incomplete because Mr. Biswas does not have enough money to complete the construction. Only one room is complete, and Mr. Biswas moves into this room and begins to live there. He has a feeling that by shifting into his own house he might be able to get rid of his depression. He hopes that living in a new house might bring about a new state of mind. But this hope proves to be vain.

Illness and Recovery

Mr. Biswas's dependency now deepens. He begins to be haunted by strange fears and questionings. He begins to have a sense of futility in life. When one night a storm begins to blow and there is a heavy downpour of rain, accompanied by thunder and lightning, Anand, who has been staying with his father in the incomplete house, feels greatly frightened. Mr. Biswas himself receives a mental shock and his condition becomes serious. The labourers carry a message to Hanuman House about Mr. Biswas's critical condition. Mr. Biswas is then carried to Hanuman House by Govind. At Hanuman House he is nursed back to health and gradually his condition becomes near-normal. As his self-respect does not allow him to continue living at Hanuman House as a dependant of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, he decides to go to Port of Spain, where his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand are living and where he would now like to try his luck. However, his attitude to Hanuman House now again undergoes a change and he regards this place as a kind of haven where he can get shelter in times of difficulty. Hanuman House is a place where his family can never starve.

As a Newspaper Reporter in Port of Spain

In Port of Spain Mr. Biswas gets a job as a reporter for a newspaper called the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Mr. Burnett, the editor of this newspaper, feels pleased with Mr. Biswas's reports. Mr. Biswas now brings his family also to Port of Spain. Mrs. Tulsi offers him and his family accommodation in her own house in this city where she has been living for some time past with her younger son Owad. Mr. Biswas begins to write articles for magazines, but none of his articles is accepted for publication. He fails as a writer of short stories also. He is at this time thirty-three years of age and is the father of four children, the fourth also being a daughter who has been given the name of Kamla. During the holidays, Mr. Biswas's children go to Hanuman House for brief visits. They start also going to meet Tara and Ajodha who continue to live at Pagotes. Owad now sails away to England for his medical studies. Mr. Biswas has begun

to take a deep interest in the education of his son Anand. As the editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel* is changed, the new editor introduces certain changes of policy, with the result that Mr. Biswas is adversely affected. Besides, Mr. Biswas feels greatly upset when the rose-garden which he had planted on one side of Mrs. Tulsi's house (in Port of Spain) is destroyed under the orders of Seth who, needing parking-space for his lorries, wanted the ground to be levelled. When Mr. Biswas expresses his resentment at the destruction of his rose-garden, Seth reminds him of the time when he had come to Hanuman House as a poor fellow having neither money nor property and when he had been established in life through his marriage with Shama.

A House of His Own At Shorthills. Then Back to Port of Spain

Mr. Biswas continues to be a dissatisfied and unhappy man. With the initiation of new policies by the newspaper management, he begins to feel miserable and would like to resign his job and is prevented from doing so only by the thought that he would not be able to find another job. The Tulsis now decide to shift from Arwacas to their estate at Shorthills to the north-east of Port of Spain, among the mountains of the northern range. Mrs. Tulsi suggests that Mr. Biswas and his family should also join them at Shorthills. Accordingly, Mr. Biswas now finds himself living in Mrs. Tulsi's house at Shorthills from where he has to cycle daily to Port of Spain in order to attend his office. His children too have to go to Port of Spain daily in order to attend their schools. At Shorthills Mr. Biswas again builds a house of his own and moves into it with his family. But one day this house catches fire and is partially destroyed. He puts up his burnt house for sale while he and his family shift again to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain where they are accommodated in two rooms. Several other relations of Mrs. Tulsi also shift from Shorthills to her house in the city. The result is that the house becomes crowded, and Mr. Biswas feels miserable in the midst of a multitude of Mrs. Tulsi's kinsfolk. To add to his troubles, the newspaper management makes a change in his duties by appointing him an investigator to study the cases of destitutes who apply for financial help from a new fund which has been established by this newspaper. Mr. Biswas finds his new work to be very tedious and even risky. Then news comes that Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti has died. He and Shama go to attend the funeral which is also attended by Mr. Biswas's brothers, his sister, and his brother-in-law, besides other relations of the family. Mr. Biswas writes an angry letter to Dr. Rameshwar who had been very rude to Mr. Biswas's brothers, Pratap and Prasad, when they had gone to the doctor to obtain Bipti's death certificate.

Mr. Bishwas's Son, Anand, Successful in the Exhibition Examination

Mr. Biswas's son Anand has been preparing for the exhibition examination in an effort to win a scholarship for higher studies.

THE STORY OF THE NOVEL

Vidiadhar, the son of Govind, has also been preparing for the same examination. When the results of the examination are declared, Vidiadhar fails, while Anand secures one of the top positions, standing third in the list of the successful candidates and winning a scholarship. Anand now joins a college for his higher studies.

Dejection and Despair. Then a New Job

Mr. Biswas is now once again overcome by feelings of despondency. He begins to sink into a state of despair. He feels as if he were sinking into a void. Night after night he feels more and more dejected. He takes less and less interest in investigating the cases of the destitutes. However, one day he suddenly feels revitalized when he is offered a government job as a Community Welfare Officer at a higher salary than he is getting from the *Trinidad Sentinel*. His boss at his new job is Miss Logie, a very intelligent and kind-hearted woman. Mr. Biswas is also now offered a government loan on nominal interest so that he may buy a car. He is also now in a position to buy a few new suits for himself. One day he wears one of his new suits and goes to witness an inter-colonial cricket match, carrying a tin of cigarettes and a box of matches in one hand, as is the fashion. Soon afterwards he buys a new Prefect car. However, Govind mocks at the car, calling it a match-box. Ajodha too makes fun of the car, saying that it is so light that it may be blown off the road by a strong wind.

Temporarily Evicted From Mrs. Tulsi's House

Mr. Biswas and his family have now to shift to a humble tenement because Mrs. Tulsi's house, in which they have been living, is to be renovated to receive Owad who is returning to Trinidad after his eight-year stay in England. Mr. Biswas feels very annoyed with Mrs. Tulsi who had asked him to vacate, though temporarily, the accommodation he had been occupying with his family. He even uses insulting language for her in his talk with Shama on this subject. The house takes three months to be renovated and, at the end of this period, Mr. Biswas again shifts to Mrs. Tulsi's house though now he gets only one room instead of the two which he had previously occupied.

A House For Mr. Biswas, At Last

After Owad's return, Mr. Biswas begins to feel even more uncomfortable than before in Mrs. Tulsi's house because of the constant hustle and bustle and the overcrowding which he has always hated. A furious quarrel now takes place between him and Mrs. Tulsi who gives him notice to quit her house while he declares that he is sorry that he ever stepped into her house. Mr. Biswas now begins to look for suitable accommodation for himself and his family because he can no longer stay in Mrs. Tulsi's house. He meets a solicitor's clerk who offers to sell his house for five thousand and six hundred dollars. Mr. Biswas borrows four thousand dollars from

Ajodha to make up the full amount demanded by the solicitor's clerk, and buys the house which is situated in Sikkim Street. The house is afterwards found to have many defects and is in need of extensive repairs. Some more money has to be spent on it but at least Mr. Biswas has a house of his own. He and his family now shift into this house which they have secured at a heavy cost.

Bad Luck. Good Luck. Heart-Attacks And Death

The debt which Mr. Biswas now owes to Ajodha becomes a heavy weight on his mind. Another misfortune overtakes Mr. Biswas when the Community Welfare Department is abolished by the government and he loses his job. Mr. Biswas now goes back to his job with the *Trinidad Sentinel* where his salary is lower than it was at his government post. However, there is a sudden burst of good luck for the family when first Savi gets a scholarship to go abroad and when, two years later, Anand gets a scholarship and goes to England. Anand's letters from England are gloomy and full of self-pity. Mr. Biswas now begins to suffer from permanent depression. One day he gets a heart-attack and has to spend a month in the hospital. Then he gets another heart-attack and is again admitted to hospital where he remains for six weeks. Luckily Savi returns to Trinidad and gets a job at a big salary. This development brings much emotional relief to Mr. Biswas. However, he suddenly passes away one day at the age of forty-six, and is cremated on the banks of a muddy stream.

“A House For Mr. Biswas” : A Chapter-wise Summary

PROLOGUE

Mr. Biswas's Circumstances Just Before His Death

Ten weeks before he died, Mr. Mohun Biswas, a journalist who had been living in Sikkim Street, Port of Spain, had been dismissed by the newspaper for which he had been working. In less than a year he had spent more than nine weeks at the Colonial Hospital. When the doctor advised him to take complete rest, the newspaper, the *Trinidad Sentinel*, had no choice but to give him three months' notice. However, his office continued to supply to him, till the very day of his death, a free copy of the newspaper. At the time of his death, Mr. Biswas was forty-six years of age and he was the father of four children. He had no money. His wife Shama also had no money. On the house in Sikkim Street, Mr. Biswas owed three thousand dollars. The interest on this amount, at eight per cent per annum, came to twenty dollars a month; the ground rent was ten dollars. Two children were still at school. The two older children, on whom Mr. Biswas might have depended, were both abroad on scholarships, though one of them returned before Mr. Biswas's death. Mr. Biswas had suggested that the family car should be sold, but Shama had opposed the idea and Mr. Biswas never again spoke of selling the car. By now he had stopped doing anything against his wife's wishes. He had begun to accept her judgment and to respect her optimism. Since they had moved to the house in Sikkim Street, Shama had learned a new loyalty to him and to the children. For Mr. Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house.

The Purchase of a House, a Stupendous Achievement

Even though the house had been mortgaged with Ajodha, Mr. Biswas had thought of it as his own. During the months of illness and despair, he was struck again and again by the wonder of owning

a house. As a boy Mr. Biswas had moved from one house of strangers to another house of strangers. And since his marriage he had lived only in houses belonging to the Tulsis—at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying house at Shorthills, and in the clumsy house in Port of Spain. And now at the end he had found himself in his own house, on his own portion of the earth. The achievement seemed to him to be stupendous. For this house Mr. Biswas had paid five thousand and fifty dollars.

The Attachment of the Solicitor's Clerk to His Mother

The solicitor's clerk from whom Mr. Biswas had bought this house used to live in every house which he built. While living in the house in Sikkim Street the solicitor's clerk was building another house in a locality called Morvant. This man had never married, and he lived with his widowed mother. Between mother and son there was much affection, and this greatly appealed to Mr. Biswas whose own mother, neglected by him, had died five years before in great poverty.

Mr. Biswas's Boundless Joy at Owning a House, Despite the Defects in It

Shama had disapproved from the very first of the idea of buying the house in Sikkim Street. Mr. Biswas had mockingly and bitterly said that she could be happy only if he and his family just kept on living with her mother. Shama had thereupon said that, if he had the money and if he wanted to buy the house, she had nothing to say. The very day the house was bought, they began to see defects in it. The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor looked as if it was sinking; the house had no back door; most of the windows did not close; one door did not open; the panels under the eaves had fallen away. They discussed these defects as calmly as they could. And soon their disappointment with the house faded, and they adjusted themselves to all the defects of the house. The house became simply their house, the house which they owned. Mr. Biswas had never parted with the furniture which he had acquired by stages in the course of his life. While shifting to a different house, he would take the same furniture with him. Accordingly, he had shifted into the house in Sikkim Street also with the same old furniture. The family had become deeply attached to this furniture. But more important than the furniture was the house which the family now owned. It would have been terrible for Mr. Biswas to be without this house at this time in his life. It would have been a great misfortune for him to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large and disintegrating family. To have lived and died as he had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated, would have been a disaster for him. Now at last he had got his own portion of the earth.

PART ONE
PART I, CHAPTER I

PASTORAL

Bipti at Her Parents' House, After a Quarrel With Raghu

Shortly before Mr. Biswas's birth, there had been another quarrel between his mother Bipti and his father Raghu. As a result of the quarrel, Bipti had gone to her mother's village, taking her three children with her. On meeting her mother Bissoondaye, Bipti had cried and repeated to her mother the old complaint of her husband's miserliness which had been the cause of the quarrel. Bipti's father, who was suffering from chronic asthma, remarked that all misfortunes were due to Fate and that human beings could do nothing about them. Nobody paid any attention to Bipti's father. Fate had brought this man from India to the sugar-estate in Trinidad where he had aged quickly and was now on his way to death in a mud hut.

The Birth of Mr. Biswas, Believed to be an Unlucky Child

While the old man kept on talking, Bissoondaye found that Bipti, pregnant as she had been, might now give birth to a child any time. She sent for the local midwife in order that the necessary preparation for the approaching delivery might be made in time. At midnight the midwife screamed, as Bipti gave birth to a child. The old man asked whether the child was a boy or a girl. The midwife told him that it was a boy but that it had been born in the wrong way and that it had six fingers. The old man felt distressed to hear this, while Bissoondaye said that she knew that some such thing would happen because there was no luck for her. Bissoondaye now walked all the way to the next village, though it was the time of night and she was all alone, and brought from there an armful of cactus leaves. She hung a strip of cactus over every door, every window and every opening, to keep away the evil spirits. But the midwife said that, no matter what precautions were taken in the house, the new-born boy would eat up his own mother and father.

The Predictions Made by the Pundit

The next morning the pundit was summoned. Bissoondaye informed the pundit that the child was born at midnight and that it was born in the wrong way. The pundit remarked that midnight was an inauspicious hour but that such matters could be got over by taking certain steps which he would suggest. He then took out his astrological almanac from his bundle and, after consulting it, he gave some disturbing information about the new-born child's future. The pundit said that the boy would have widely-spaced teeth and that he would grow into a lecher, a spendthrift, and a liar. As for

the boy's six fingers, it was another alarming symptom. The pundit suggested that the boy should always be kept away from trees and from water, and that he should never be allowed to go close to a river or a pond. The pundit also said that the boy's sneeze should always be regarded as an evil omen. The pundit went on to say that a necessary precaution to take was not to allow the boy's father to see the boy for twenty-one days, and that even on the twenty-first day the father must not see the boy in the flesh but should only take a look at the boy's reflection in coconut oil poured into a brass plate. Bissoondaye then asked what name the boy should be given, whereupon the pundit said that the boy should be given a name beginning with the prefix "Mo". Bissoondaye asked if Mohun would be a good name. The pundit was much pleased to hear the name of Mohun because it was one of the names of Lord Krishna. The pundit then got up to go and Bissoondaye gave him a florin* as his fee.

A Celebration

Mr. Biswas's sixth finger fell off before he was nine days old. Bissoondaye thought this to be a good sign, and she buried the finger at the back of the house. In the days which followed, Mr. Biswas was treated with much consideration. His brother and sisters were slapped if they disturbed his sleep. Morning and evening he was massaged with coconut oil. On the ninth day Bissoondaye held a celebration. She invited some people from the village and fed them. The pundit too was invited to the feast. Jhagru, the barber, brought his drum, and Selochan performed the Shiva dance, with his body smeared all over with ashes.

Raghu, Allowed to See His Son's Reflection in Oil

There was an embarrassing moment when Raghu, the father of Mr. Biswas, appeared on the scene. He expressed strong displeasure on finding that celebrations were being held while the boy's father had not even been informed about the function. Bissoondaye pointed out that he had misbehaved, as he had always done, when the time for Bipti to give birth to a child approached. Raghu said that he wanted to see his son. Bissoondaye told him that, if he saw his son before the twenty-first day, the boy would eat him up because the boy was born with six fingers and in the wrong way, and because the boy had an unlucky sneeze as well. Raghu expressed his regret at the way he had behaved with Bipti, whereupon Bipti said that she was willing to go back to him. He agreed to come again on the twenty-first day. On the twenty-first day Raghu came again and, as directed by the pundit, looked at the reflection of his son in coconut oil which had been poured into a brass plate.

*Florin—a gold coin.

Mr. Biswas's Unlucky Sneeze

A few days later, Bipti and her children went back home to Raghu. There Mr. Biswas's importance began to diminish steadily. The day came when even the daily massage ceased. However, the fact that some unpleasant predictions about the boy's future had been made by the pundit was not forgotten. The boy's sneeze actually proved to be unlucky with the result that, if on any day Mr. Biswas sneezed when Raghu was about to leave for his work on the sugar-estate, Raghu would give up the idea of going, and remained at home. Even though Raghu remained at home on such occasions, minor mishaps yet occurred. Somebody in the family might lose a coin; a kettle might get broken; or a dish might be upset, spilling the contents. On one occasion Mr. Biswas sneezed on three mornings one after the other, whereupon Raghu said that this boy would really eat up his family. On another occasion, when Mr. Biswas sneezed, Raghu said that the boy would make them all paupers.

Raghu's Miserliness, And His Apprehensions

Raghu now began to feel really afraid that the boy might cause the family to become absolutely destitute. Raghu was indeed a miser. He saved as much money as he could. The more he hoarded, the more he realized the need of exercising economy. Every Saturday he lined up with the other labourers outside the estate office to collect his pay; and every time he got his pay, he put a few pennies into a blue paper bag of which he had acquired a considerable number. No one, not even Bipti, knew where Raghu hid these bags; but it began to be rumoured that he buried his money in the ground and was possibly the richest man in the village.

Mr. Biswas, Not Allowed to Go Near Ponds and Rivers

Mr. Biswas was now growing up. As he was not being properly nourished, he began to suffer from all kinds of ailments such as eczema and sores of all kinds. Under-nourishment led to his having a very thin body. Life for him became rather unpleasant because he was not allowed to go near ponds and rivers. Raghu himself was an excellent swimmer and he had been training his other two sons, Pratap and Prasad, in the art of swimming. Mr. Biswas remained at home with his sister Dehuti when Raghu took his other two sons with him on such occasions.

Mr. Biswas's Two Brothers, Looking After Buffaloes

Pratap was eleven, while Prasad was nine. Although the laws of the land did not permit children of these ages to work, Pratap and Prasad had begun working in order to earn some money. The two boys had developed adult mannerisms. They held blades of grass between their teeth when they spoke; they drank noisily and then passed the back of their hands across their mouths; they ate large quantities of rice, patted their bellies, and belched. Every Saturday

they stood in the queue to draw their pay. Their job was to look after the buffaloes which drew the carts laden with sugarcane. They had to move all day in the mud among the buffaloes. Mr. Biswas would most probably have joined his brothers at the buffalo-pond to do the same work, but the pundit's warning against water prevented the family from letting Mr. Biswas take up that job. The only other alternative for Mr. Biswas was to join the boys and girls who had to carry grass on their heads from the fields.

Mr. Biswas, Put in Charge of Dhari's Calf

Raghu's next-door neighbour was a man called Dhari. Dhari now bought a cow and, when this cow gave birth to a calf, Dhari engaged Mr. Biswas to look after the calf at a penny a week. Raghu and Bipti felt pleased that Mr. Biswas too would now be earning some money. Mr. Biswas's work was to take water to the calf during the day. But after a few days Mr. Biswas also started taking the calf for walks across the damp fields and to feed it with grass of many kinds. In the course of one such trip, Mr. Biswas discovered the stream where Bipti and Dehuti used to go on Sunday afternoons to do the washing. Although Mr. Biswas had specifically been forbidden to go near water, he felt much attracted by the stream and he started going to it daily. The stream seemed to offer endless delights to Mr. Biswas. He often watched the small black fish moving through the water in their large numbers. On one occasion he tried to catch some fish with a bamboo rod and a string, but failed to catch any.

The Calf, Lost. Raghu to Dive Into the Pond

One day Mr. Biswas lost the calf. He had forgotten it while watching the fish. When he did remember the calf, he found it gone. He made a search for it along the banks of the stream and in the fields nearby, but did not find it. Thinking further search to be futile, he decided to go home and hide himself till the calf was found by somebody else or till the calf automatically returned home. At home Mr. Biswas hid himself under his father's bed. After a little while, Dhari came to Raghu's house and asked where Mohun was. Nobody had seen Mohun. Dhari said that it seemed that his calf had been lost. Dhari threatened to report the matter to the police. It occurred to Dhari that the calf might have got drowned in the pond. He began to shout to the neighbours that Raghu's son had drowned his calf in the pond. A crowd now gathered at Raghu's door. Some people said that they had seen a calf wandering about near the pond. Raghu told them that the boy had particularly been warned against going near ponds and streams. Lakhan, who was a carter, said that Mr. Biswas himself might have got drowned in the pond also. Lakhan, who was a good swimmer and diver, offered to dive into the pond to make a search for the drowned body of Mr. Biswas. Thereupon Raghu said that he, being the boy's father, would himself dive and search for him. Raghu said that he might also find the

drowned calf. The whole crowd then moved to the pond. All this time Mr. Biswas lay hidden under his father's bed. When the crowd had moved away, Mr. Biswas came out and whispered to his sister Dehuti that he was quite safe. Dehuti began to scream, but there was nobody to pay any attention to her.

Raghu, Drowned While Searching For Mr. Biswas

Raghu had already stripped. Coconut oil was applied to his body, and he then dived into the pond. Everybody watched in suspense. When it seemed that Raghu was taking too much time to emerge from the water, Lakhan got ready to dive into the pond in order to look for Raghu. However, at that very moment, Raghu re-appeared on the surface. Raghu said that he had felt something lying at the bottom of the pond but had not been able to make out what it was. Raghu then dived into the pond once again. This time Raghu re-appeared, dragging the drowned calf with him. But he had still to find his son Mr. Biswas who too was presumed to have been drowned. So Raghu dived again into the pond. This time Raghu did not re-appear. Sensing danger, Lakhan now hurriedly dived into the pond. After a few moments Lakhan brought up Raghu unconscious. They rolled the unconscious Raghu on the grass and pumped the water out of his mouth and through his nostrils, but it was too late. Raghu was dead. Dhari said that the boy, meaning Mr. Biswas, had murdered his calf and had also eaten up his own father.

The Arrival of Bipti's Sister Tara

Messages were sent to friends and relations about Raghu's death by drowning. Bipti's sister Tara, who lived at Pagotes, was informed also. Tara was a person of high social standing, though she was unlucky in being childless. Her husband had made a lot of money and he now owned a rum-shop and a dry-goods shop. He was one of the first in Trinidad to buy a motor-car. Tara arrived at Bipti's house and at once took charge of all the arrangements in connection with the funeral. Cremation of the dead Raghu had been forbidden, and Raghu's dead body was to be buried. Before the burial took place, Tara had the family group photographed. Tara had suggested the photograph because she meant the picture to be a record of the family all together for the last time.

Dehuti, Taken Away By Tara

After the funeral, Tara suggested that Dehuti* should be given to her and that she was willing to take Dehuti to her own house and keep her there. Bipti agreed, saying that it was better for Tara to have a servant from her own family than from outside. The others also agreed to this arrangement. Tara now asked Bipti how much money Raghu had left for her. Bipti knew nothing about the money.

*Dehuti was Bipti's daughter.

The whole house was ransacked, but no money was found. Tara then departed taking Dehuti with her.

Dhari, Digging the Ground to Find Raghu's Money

One night Bipti was awakened from her sleep by a noise coming from her garden. Actually she had heard this noise for several nights now. She woke up Prasad and Pratap in order to find out the reason for this noise. On opening the window and looking through it, they all spotted Dhari digging the ground in the light of a lantern. Evidently, Dhari believed that Raghu had buried his wealth in his garden, and he was now searching for the treasure in order to make up for his loss of the calf. Pratap said that he would murder Dhari, but Bipti urged him to remain quiet and to let Dhari go on with his villainous digging.

The Family, Split

In the end Bipti sold her hut and her land to Dhari. She and Mr. Biswas moved to Pagotes where they were given some accommodation by Tara in a house situated in a back trace far from the main road. Pratap and Prasad were sent to a distant relation at Felicity, in the heart of the sugar-estates where they started working as labourers, having already been trained in that capacity. Dehuti had already started living in Tara's house as a sort of dependant and domestic servant. Thus the whole family was now split, as had been anticipated by Tara.

PART I, CHAPTER TWO

BEFORE THE TULSIS

The Oil-Rich Earth

Mr. Biswas never learned whether any one had found Raghu's money. Even if it had been found, it could not have been much, because Raghu's income had always been very meagre. However, the digging did serve some purpose because in course of time, in later years, the earth here was found to be rich with oil.

A Birth Certificate, Required for Mr. Biswas

At Pagotes, Mr. Biswas was sent to the Canadian Mission School where he received instruction from a teacher by the name of Lal who had been converted from a low Hindu caste to Presbyterianism, a sect of Christianity. Lal, the teacher, had, after his conversion, begun to look upon Hindus with contempt and, as part of this contempt, he generally spoke to them in English of which, however, he had only a smattering.* Lal demanded Mr. Biswas's birth certificate which Mr. Biswas did not have. Bipti went to consult Tara

about the birth certificate which was required at the school. Tara took Bipti to a solicitor by the name of F.Z. Ghany. Ghany was a Muslim but he made most of his money from Hindus. Tara explained that a birthday certificate was required for Bipti's son, Mr. Biswas. Ghany asked what the date of birth of Mr. Biswas was, and Bipti said that it was the 8th of June. Ghany took down the date specified by Bipti and other necessary particulars and said that the birth certificate would be got ready soon. It was an expensive affair, he said. He demanded ten dollars as his fee which Tara paid. Ghany said that if any more birth certificates were required, he would do the needful.

Mr. Biswas At School. A Fellow-Student, Called Alec

Mr. Biswas had now entered a new world in which he had to learn arithmetic and other branches of knowledge. Among his fellow-students, there was a Christian boy by the name of Alec. One day Alec came wearing a shirt which looked like one of his mother's bodices. On being questioned by the teacher about that shirt, Alec said that he had got it from his sister-in-law. As Alec had not been able to reply correctly to a sum in arithmetic, the teacher said that Alec should take a message from him to his sister-in-law, and the message was that zero multiplied by zero did not make four but only zero, and that two multiplied by two made four. Of course, Alec was given several strokes with the teacher's tamarind rod for his failure to have given the correct reply.

Subjects, Studied By Mr. Biswas

Mr. Biswas was taught other things, besides arithmetic. He learned to say the Lord's Prayer in Hindi from the *King George V Hindi Reader* and he learned many English poems by heart from a book called the *Royal Reader*. At the teacher's dictation, Mr. Biswas made plentiful notes about geysers, valleys, watersheds, currents, the Gulf Stream, and a number of deserts. He learned about oases and about igloos. In arithmetic he got as far as simple interest, and learned to turn dollars and cents into pounds, shillings, and pence. From Alec, the boy in the red bodice, Mr. Biswas first heard about the Great War (1914-18).

Alec's Strange Behaviour

With this boy, namely Alec, Mr. Biswas became quite friendly. The colour of Alec's clothes was always a source of surprise to his fellow-students. One day Alec shocked the whole school by the colour of his urine which had become blue. It was afterwards revealed that Alec had taken a few of the Dodd's Kidney Pills belonging to the same sister-in-law who had given a red bodice to Alec. Several other boys, on learning this fact, bought the same pills from the drug-store with the result that their urine also became blue for the next several days.

Mr. Biswas's Friendship with Alec

In Alec's company, Mr. Biswas laid six-inch nails on the railway track at the back of the Main Road and had them flattened to make knives and bayonets. Together the two boys went to the Pagotes river and smoked their first cigarettes. They tore off their shirt-buttons and exchanged them for marbles. At school, they sat at the same desk, talked, were flogged, and were separated, but they always came together again. It was through this association that Mr. Biswas discovered his talent for lettering. When Alec felt tired of doing erotic drawings, he designed letters. Mr. Biswas imitated these with pleasure and with growing success. His lettering became so nice that the teacher called him a sign-painter. Mr. Biswas's talent was greatly appreciated by the whole class who looked upon him as a kind of hero in this sphere.

The Handicaps in the Life of Mr. Biswas

Mr. Biswas attended Lal's school for nearly six years and during the whole of this period he remained friendly with Alec. Yet Mr. Biswas knew nothing about Alec's home life. Alec never spoke about his mother or father; and Mr. Biswas knew only that Alec lived with his sister-in-law, the one who had given him a red bodice and whose Kidney Pills he had once swallowed. Mr. Biswas never saw this woman because he had never gone to Alec's home, and Alec too had never come to Mr. Biswas's home. It would have greatly embarrassed Mr. Biswas if any one from the school had seen the place where he lived. Mr. Biswas lived with his mother in one room of a mud-hut in the back trace. He was not happy there and, even after five years, he considered it a temporary arrangement. Most of the persons living in that hut remained strangers to him; and even with his mother Bipti his relationship was not a very satisfactory one. More and more she blamed her Fate and sometimes she lost her temper and quarrelled with Tara. Most of the time when Mr. Biswas was with his mother, he had to struggle against his feelings of anger and depression because she never inspired any pleasant feelings in him.

A Lack of Warmth in Mr. Biswas's Relationships

At Christmas Mr. Biswas's brothers, Pratap and Prasad, came from Felicity. They were now grown men, with moustaches. But they too were like strangers to Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas felt no interest when Pratap told him that he had bought a donkey. As for his sister Dehuti, Mr. Biswas hardly saw her, though she lived nearby at Tara's house where she worked as a servant. Mr. Biswas went to Tara's house only when a religious ceremony was held and when some Brahmins were needed in order to be fed. On such occasions Mr. Biswas was treated with much regard because he was a Brahmin; and yet, as soon as the ceremony was over, and he had received his share of money and clothing, he became once more only a labourer's

son. In the birth certificate, which Ghany had sent to Bipti, one of the entries was that Mr. Biswas was the son of a labourer.

A Penny a Day For Mr. Biswas

Tara's husband, Ajodha, was a thin man with a thin face. He sometimes summoned Mr. Biswas to his house and asked him to read out a particular column from the newspaper. Although Ajodha could himself read, yet he thought it more dignified to have somebody else to read out to him the column referred to. The heading of this column was "That Body of Yours". This daily column dealt with a different disease of the human body everyday. Ajodha listened seriously, and with feelings of great concern, to Mr. Biswas's reading of this column, and he paid Mr. Biswas at the rate of a penny a day. The writer of this column was a certain doctor by the name of Samuel S. Pitkin who kept the column going with unfailing regularity. Twenty years later, this column was still continuing, and Ajodha had still not lost his taste for it.

Mr. Biswas's Visits to Tara's House

Thus whenever Mr. Biswas went to Tara's house it was either as a Brahmin to be fed at a religious ceremony or as a reader to read out a newspaper column to Tara's husband at a penny a day. His status on such occasions was different from that of his sister Dehuti, and therefore he hardly got any opportunity of speaking to her. Bipti was now feeling much worried about her children. None of her grown-up children, neither Pratap nor Prasad nor Dehuti, was yet married.

Withdrawn From School After Six Years

Just when Mr. Biswas was beginning to learn stocks and shares in arithmetic and when he was about to study *Bell's Standard Elocutionist* in order to prepare for the visit of the school inspector, he was taken out of school by Tara and told that he would now be put under the charge of a priest in order to be made a pundit. When Mr. Biswas was packing his possessions, he found that he still had the school's copy of the *Standard Elocutionist*. It was too late for him to return the book to the school, and so the book remained with him always.

Under Pundit Jairam's Care

Mr. Biswas was now entrusted to the care of Pundit Jairam. For eight months Pundit Jairam taught him Hindi, introduced him to the more important scriptures, and instructed him in various ceremonies. Morning and evening, under the Pundit's supervision, Mr. Biswas did the *puja* for the Pundit's household.

Mr. Biswas, Being Trained to Become a Pundit

Pundit Jairam lived with his wife who was a hard-working woman and whose only duty now was to look after Pundit Jairam

and his house because all her children had been married and lived in their own homes. Pundit Jairam was certainly respected among the Hindus for his knowledge, but his views were unorthodox. He believed in God but declared that it was not necessary for a Hindu to do so. He ate no meat but he condemned vegetarianism. He said that when Lord Rama went for hunting during the period of his exile, he did not do so just for sport but to get the animals' flesh to serve as food. Pundit Jairam was also writing a Hindi commentary on the *Ramayana*; and now parts of this commentary were dictated by him to Mr. Biswas so that Mr. Biswas too could learn something. Pundit Jairam took Mr. Biswas on his professional visits, with the result that Mr. Biswas now became an object of considerable regard in Tara's house.

Two Bananas, Stolen By Mr. Biswas

At the ceremonies which Mr. Biswas attended as Pundit Jairam's assistant, he would be seated next to his boss; and, when Jairam had eaten and belched and asked for more and eaten again, it was Mr. Biswas who would mix the bicarbonate of soda for him. Mr. Biswas had also to bring home all the gifts which Jairam received. The gifts were usually some cotton cloth and baskets of fruits and vegetables. On one occasion Mr. Biswas carried home a large bunch of bananas which Jairam had received as a gift. This bunch was hung in the kitchen to ripen. One day, when Jairam and his wife had gone out and Mr. Biswas was alone in the house, he picked two bananas and ate them. On his return Jairam detected the theft. He summoned Mr. Biswas and asked him to start eating the remaining bananas. When Mr. Biswas had eaten seven bananas under this compulsion, he began to feel sick. Jairam's wife, feeling sympathetic, took him away from Jairam's presence.

Mr. Biswas, Dismissed By Pundit Jairam

The result of this over-eating of bananas was that Mr. Biswas's stomach was upset. He now became habitually constipated, and the call would come to him at unpredictable times. And it was this which led to his dismissal from Jairam's house and took him back to Pagotes. One night Mr. Biswas suddenly felt the need to relieve himself. The latrine was quite far from the house; and to go there through the darkness frightened him. Also, he did not wish to disturb Jairam by walking over the creaking wooden floor of the house. So he relieved himself in his room on one of his handkerchiefs and then threw the handkerchief out of the window. As ill luck would have it, the handkerchief fell upon a tree which was regarded as holy by Jairam. On making this discovery Jairam felt that he could never again use the flowers of this tree for his *puja*. He flew into a temper and told Mr. Biswas that the latter could never become a pundit. Mr. Biswas was then asked to pack up and quit.

Bipti's Rebuke to Mr. Biswas

Mr. Biswas reached home at Pagotes, tired and hungry. His mother Bipti was furious with him. She said that he was ungrateful and that all her children were ungrateful because they could not appreciate what others did for them. Bipti's harshness surprised Mr. Biswas. However, thirty years later, when he wrote a poem to describe this experience, he did not make any mention of his disappointment and his sullenness in it. The passing of time had healed his wound.

Mr. Biswas to Work At Tara's Rum-Shop

Mr. Biswas now learned that there was another reason for Bipti's harshness also. Dehuti had run away with one of the servants of Tara, thus not only showing her ingratitude towards Tara but also bringing disgrace to that lady. Tara had vowed never to mention the name of Dehuti again; and she felt greatly annoyed if any one else mentioned the girl. As for himself Mr. Biswas had now no choice but to go to Tara to find out if she would help him. Tara received him with considerable sympathy. Her husband Ajodha had bought a motor-bus and opened a garage. Alec was now working in that garage as a mechanic. But Mr. Biswas was not asked to join Alec in the garage. Tara sent him to her rum-shop which was being run by Ajodha's brother, Bhandat.

Mr. Biswas's Life At the Run-Shop Under Bhandat

Working at the rum-shop was a new experience for Mr. Biswas. He heard certain unpleasant rumours. It was said that Bhandat drank heavily, was in the habit of beating his wife, and was keeping a mistress of a different community. Mr. Biswas also discovered that Bhandat was cheating his customers by giving them less than the full measure of the drinks ordered by them in the shop. In this way Bhandat was making extra money for himself. Mr. Biswas further came to know that, although the labels on the bottles showed that there were different brands of rum, actually the same rum was poured into all the bottles and given different names. Bhandat was living with his wife and two sons in a two-room house. Mr. Biswas had to sleep with Bhandat's two sons on a hard mattress on the floor. From his wages, Mr. Biswas began to give one dollar a month to his mother Bipti whom he would go to see on Sundays and Thursday afternoons when the shop was closed. He also occasionally visited Tara. On one of these visits, he found the twenty volumes of the *Book of Comprehensive Knowledge*, which Ajodha had obtained from an American travelling salesman. Sometimes Mr. Biswas would read out to Ajodha the column called "That Body of Yours", receiving a penny for his trouble. And thereafter he would read as much he could from the *Book of Comprehensive Knowledge* for his own benefit. Bhandat's sons in the meanwhile

were learning to smoke; they were also fond of telling scandalous and unbelievable stories relating to sex. Mr. Biswas never felt interested in the activities of these boys. Bhandat spent more and more week-ends away from the rum-shop, because he wanted to spend as much time as possible with his mistress. Bhandat's quarrels with his wife now became very frequent.

Mr. Biswas, Dismissed By Bhandat

One day Mr. Biswas was alone in Bhandat's house because the whole family had gone to the funeral of a relation who had died. On the next day, when Bhandat returned, he found his money short by one dollar. Bhandat jumped to the conclusion that Mr. Biswas must have pilfered the money. Mr. Biswas said that he had not touched Bhandat's money and that he was not even aware that there was any money in the house. But Bhandat gave him a beating with his leather-belt and turned him out of his house. Mr. Biswas had no alternative but to go back to Bipti.

A Futile Search For a Job

Bipti said that it was Fate which had brought Mr. Biswas back from a place where he was working and making a little money. She said that she had no luck with her children. Mr. Biswas now thought of getting a job somewhere else. He set out to look for one. He passed many shops, including those of a tailor, a barber, an undertaker, a dry-goods seller, and so on. But none of these trades seemed to interest Mr. Biswas. He returned home to the back street disappointed. Bipti suggested that he should go and make up with Tara from whose rum-shop he had been driven away, but Mr. Biswas said that he would rather kill himself.

A Meeting With Dehuti's Husband and Dehuti Herself

Feeling angry, Mr. Biswas now made up his mind to walk until he felt tired. He followed the main road and, by late afternoon, he found himself several miles away from Pagotes. He suddenly saw a slender young man whom he recognized. This young man was Ramchand, Tara's servant, with whom Dehuti had eloped. Ramchand was very glad to meet Mr. Biswas and asked him all sorts of questions about the family and about Mr. Biswas himself. Ramchand then took Mr. Biswas to his house to meet Dehuti. Dehuti had now got a child also, and she looked careworn and sulky. She now looked an ugly woman. Nor did Dehuti show any happiness at meeting her brother. Ramchand talked a good deal in his usual cheery manner. He told Mr. Biswas that Pratap* had got into a mess because of the donkeys he kept on buying for no reason at all. Ramchand said that two donkeys bought by Pratap had already died. Ramchand then told Mr. Biswas that Prasad* was looking for

*Pratap and Prasad were Mr. Biswas's brothers.

a wife. Ramchand also spoke about Bhandat and Bhandat's mistress. Ramchand then informed Mr. Biswas that he was going to add an extra room to his hut and said that Mr. Biswas could come and stay in that additional room. Eventually, Mr. Biswas took leave of Ramchand and Dehuti, but he felt that he had derived no pleasure at all from his visit.

The New Job : Mr. Biswas As a Sign-Painter

Then Alec re-appeared in Pagotes. Alec had given up his job as a motor mechanic and had become a sign-board painter. Mr. Biswas had been a very good hand at lettering, and so Alec suggested that Mr. Biswas should also become a sign-board painter. Alec then introduced Mr. Biswas to the proprietor of a cafe where Alec had undertaken some painting work. In this way Mr. Biswas became a sign-writer. With Alec's help, he worked on the cafe sign and, to his delight and surprise, his work satisfied the proprietor. He now entered into a working partnership with Alec.

Bhandat's Two Sons, Living At Tara's House

After a time Mr. Biswas started visiting Tara's house again. She felt no ill-will towards him. However, he was disappointed to find that Ajodha no longer required him to read the column called "That Body of Yours". One of Bhandat's sons now performed that duty. Mr. Biswas now also learnt that Bhandat's wife had died during a subsequent child-birth and that Bhandat* had left his sons and gone to live with his mistress in Port of Spain. That was the reason why Bhandat's sons had moved from the squalor of the rum-shop to the comfort of Tara's house.

Irregular Work. Reading Novels

Mr. Biswas continued to paint signs. It was satisfying work, but it came irregularly. Alec wandered from district to district, sometimes working, sometimes not working, so that the partnership was often interrupted by periods of idleness. There were many weeks when Mr. Biswas was altogether out of work, and when he only read, designed letters, and practised his drawing. However, he got plenty of work when Christmas came. To satisfy the extravagant tastes of the shopkeepers, he scanned foreign magazines. From looking at magazines for the lettering, he began to read them for their stories. Then, during his long weeks of leisure, he went through such novels as he could find at the bookstalls of Pagotes. He went through the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. He became increasingly dissatisfied with living at the back trace and wanted Bipti to shift to some other lodging. But Bipti was unwilling to leave the back trace because she said that she would have no place to

*Bhandat was Ajodha's brother. (Ajodha was Tara's husband. Tara was Bipti's sister. Bipti was Mr. Biswas's mother.)

live at in case he got married. But Mr. Biswas said that he would never get married as he had only a meagre income and no decent accommodation. However, Pratap and Prasad had already got married, Pratap to a tall, handsome woman who was giving birth to a child every eighteen months, and Prasad to a woman of exceptional ugliness who proved to be barren.

No Continuity of Occupation. As a Bus-Conductor

Mr. Biswas had to continue living in the back trace. He now got interested in the novels and other writings of Samuel Smiles. As sign-painting did not bring much money, Mr. Biswas wondered what else he could do. He bought elementary books on science. Among the books he bought was the seven-volume *Hawkins' Electrical Guide*, from which he wanted to learn some kind of mechanical and electrical skill. But to acquire any such skill, he needed equipment which he could not obtain from anywhere. The result was that his interest in electrical matters faded away. He then became a conductor on one of Ajodha's buses which ran in competition with other buses. There were times when Alec, who never stuck to any one trade or to any one place, came to Pagotes and spoke of certain pleasures. Alec took Mr. Biswas to certain houses which at first frightened him, then attracted him, and finally just amused him. Love for a girl was something which he was embarrassed to think about. Alec told him that such things as love came when one least expected them. Then one day Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House at Arwacas to paint signs for the Tulsi Store which was situated on the ground floor of that building.

PART I, CHAPTER III

THE TULSIS

A Conservative, Land-Owning Family

Hanuman House was a tumbledown building in the High Street at Arwacas. The Tulsi family had a reputation among Hindus as a pious, conservative, land-owning family. Other communities, who knew nothing of the Tulsis, had heard about Pundit Tulsi, the founder of the family. He had been one of the first to be killed in a motor-car accident.

Mr. Biswas, Engaged By Mr. Seth to Paint Signs

As already pointed out, Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House to paint signs for the Tulsi Store. He had been interviewed for the job by Mr. Seth who was a brother of Mrs. Tulsi's dead husband. Seth had engaged Mr. Biswas on the minimum possible terms. Mr. Biswas found the Tulsi Store a disappointing affair in spite of the fact that several shop-assistants were at work there. Mr. Biswas learnt with surprise that all the shop-assistants were members of the family and were related to Mrs. Tulsi in one way or the other. He

A CHAPTER-WISE SUMMARY

felt that he would have to be very careful while paintings signs at this place. The Store was situated on the ground floor of Hanuman House.

A Girl-Friend For Mr. Biswas

Among the girls who worked as shop-assistants was one by the name of Shama who was about sixteen years old. It was natural for Mr. Biswas to steal glances at this girl as often as possible. She became conscious of the fact that he stared at her whenever he could. He got a feeling that she was responding to his stares. This led him to think that a certain communication had been established between him and her. So, meeting Alec one day in Pagotes (where Alec was once again working as a mechanic in Ajodha's garage), he told Alec that he had got a girl-friend in Arwacas. Alec congratulated him on his good luck.

A Note, Written By Mr. Biswas To Shama, a Salesgirl

When Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House the next day he carried a note in his pocket. He went to Shama's counter and adroitly put the note under a piece of cloth on the counter. She saw the note and smiled. The note bore the following words: "I love you and I want to talk to you." Just then a Negro woman came into the store and asked Shama to show her a pair of flesh-coloured stockings. Flesh-coloured stockings had at that time become very popular in rural Trinidad. Shama absent-mindedly took down a box and produced a pair of black, cotton stockings. The Negro woman, finding that the salesgirl was showing her something entirely different from what she had asked for, became furious and began to scold Shama. Hearing the noise, Mrs. Tulsi appeared on the scene. Mr. Biswas, who was working at his sign-painting, saw that Mrs. Tulsi was as laden with jewellery as Tara used to be. Mrs. Tulsi, on being told by the Negro woman the reason for her annoyance, reprimanded Shama in order to pacify the Negro woman. Mrs. Tulsi then gave a pair of flesh-coloured stockings to the Negro woman free of charge. When the Negro woman had gone, Mrs. Tulsi saw the note on Shama's counter and stealthily picked it up. At this time Mr. Biswas left the store and went to the nearby cafe for some refreshments. When he returned to the store he felt relieved to find that Shama was not present for her afternoon duty. He then got busy doing his sign-painting work. A little before closing time, Seth came into the store and told Mr. Biswas that Mrs. Tulsi wanted to see him. Mr. Biswas thereupon followed Seth through the back door to the damp, gloomy courtyard where he had never been so far. Looking back at walls of the house, Mr. Biswas saw life-size carvings of the deity Hanuman. Eventually, he found himself in Mrs. Tulsi's presence. In her hand she held the note which Mr. Biswas had written.

Marriage with Shama Proposed By Mrs. Tulsi to Mr. Biswas

Mrs. Tulsi now asked Mr. Biswas if he had written the note, but he denied having done so. Instead of becoming angry at this

denial, she looked absolutely calm and composed, while Seth burst into a laugh, saying that, if Mr. Biswas had written the note, it was nothing to be ashamed about. The upshot of this interview was that both Mrs. Tulsi and Seth suggested that Mr. Biswas should get married to Shama. Shama, it turned out, was one of Mrs. Tulsi's daughters. Mr. Biswas said that, as he did not yet have a sufficient income, he had never thought in terms of marriage. Seth said that Mr. Biswas should not worry about money because, after all, he belonged to Ajodha's family and because he knew that family well. Mr. Biswas noted that at this time the faces of children and women were peeping at him through the kitchen doorway. Mr. Biswas had a feeling that the Tulsi family was a large one. He also felt that there was no escape from the commitment which he had made by writing that note. He felt trapped.

Mr. Biswas's Restlessness at the Prospect of Marriage

On his way home to Pagotes, Mr. Biswas actually felt elated. But the elation was not one of relief. He thought that he was now involved in large events. He had been overpowered and frightened by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi and all the Tulsi women and children. And when that evening Alec asked him how his girl-friend was getting on, Mr. Biswas told him that he had had a talk with the girl's mother and that he expected a good deal of money as dowry. And yet inwardly Mr. Biswas was feeling deeply disturbed. All that evening he wondered whether he should at all go again to Hanuman House. However, next morning everything seemed ordinary, with the result that both his fear and regret seemed to him absolutely irrelevant. He went to the Tulsi Store and got busy with his painting work.

The Marriage to Take Place At the Registrar's Office

That day Mr. Biswas was invited by the Tulsi family to lunch in the hall. Mrs. Tulsi sat next to him and told him that she and her late husband had never quarrelled with each other. She also told him that this house had been built by her late husband with his own hands. She then informed him that, just when her husband was to take the family back to India for a trip, he was killed in a car-accident. Mr. Biswas said that her husband's death must have come as a blow to the family. Mrs. Tulsi said that it had certainly been a blow, especially because only one of the daughters in the family had up to that time been married, because there were two sons yet to be educated, and because the family had no money. Mr. Biswas, on hearing that the family had no money, felt inwardly much perturbed. Mrs. Tulsi then said that, if her husband had been alive, he would have become fond of Mr. Biswas and that he would have felt proud to know that Mr. Biswas would be marrying one of his daughters. Mrs. Tulsi ended the conversation by saying that she was very particular about the family from which any son-in-law of hers came. Blood was

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the most important consideration for her. She said that she was glad that Mr. Biswas came from good blood. She then said that what was needed in his case was a little ceremony at the registrar's office. (What she meant was that there was no need to go through the whole elaborate ceremonial of marriage and that he would be married to Shama at the office of the registrar. Evidently, she wanted to save all the money that she could by avoiding the expensive kind of marriage performed in accordance with the traditional mode).

Marriage, An Accomplished Fact

Mr. Biswas was now feeling much worried about his forthcoming marriage. He wondered what would happen to his mother and where he would live with his wife. He had no money and no job. As for his sign-writing, it was good enough for a young man living with his mother, but it was hardly a secure profession for a married man. To get a house for himself and his wife, he would first need a proper job. To get a job he needed some time, but the Tulsis were giving him no time at all. Perhaps, he thought, the Tulsis would not only give him a good dowry but would also help him with a job and a house. He wanted to discuss the whole matter with Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, but he discovered that they had become inaccessible to him after the notice about the marriage had been given to the registrar's office. At Hanuman House, in the midst of the crowd of daughters, sons-in-law, and the children, he began to feel lost because no one there took much notice of him. He could not even withdraw from the commitment which he had made about marrying Shama. Nor did he wish to tell his mother Bipti anything about the forthcoming marriage. After a few days he found himself married at a brief ceremony performed at the office of the registrar. He and his wife were accommodated at Hanuman House in a portion of a long room on the top floor.

No Dowry ; No Job ; And No Separate House

Neither on the day of the marriage nor on the following days did anyone mention a dowry, or a job, or a separate house. It seemed that neither Mrs. Tulsi nor Seth thought it necessary to mention any of these matters. They had done their duty and were no longer interested in Mr. Biswas. They had given Shama to him in marriage simply because he was of the proper caste, just as they had given their daughter Chinta (generally addressed, and referred to, as C) in marriage to an illiterate coconut-seller who too belonged to the proper caste.

His Departure From Hanuman House

The organization of the Tulsi house was simple. Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a Negro woman who was called Blackie by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, and Miss Blackie by everybody else. The daughters swept the house ; they washed the clothes, they did the

cooking ; and they served in the Store. The sons-in-law, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and also did some work in the Tulsi Store. In return they were all given food, accommodation, and a little money ; their children were properly looked after ; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas found that he too was expected to merge himself with the Tulsi family and to efface his own identity. At once he rebelled against such a contingency and decided that the time had come for him to escape from this place, with Shama or without her. Accordingly, he packed up the few clothes which he had, left Hanuman House and went back to Pagotes. Shama, who was a thoroughgoing Tulsi, did not go with him.

His Return to Hanuman House At Tara's Suggestion

In Pagotes, however, Mr. Biswas found that his marriage was no secret from any one. Bipti welcomed him with tears of joy, saying that she had always believed that he would not let her down. On the following day she put on her best clothes and went on a visit to Arwacas. When she came back, she was feeling overwhelmed by Mrs. Tulsi's kindness and by the splendour of Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas spent two days in hiding at her mother's lodging in the back trace, not wishing to see Alec or Bhandat's two sons. On the third day, feeling uncomfortable, he went to Tara's house. Tara's husband, Ajodha, greeted him by shouting that the married man had come. Ajodha called out to his wife to come and look at her married nephew. Tara received Mr. Biswas hospitably and then asked what kind of a dowry he had received from the Tulsis. Mr. Biswas replied that he had not received a single penny from them and that they had not even paid him his wages for the work of signboard-painting which he had done for their Store. Tara said that she would go to Hanuman House and find out why they had behaved in that manner. On the following day Tara went to Hanuman House and came back with what she thought was good news. She told Mr. Biswas that he was not to live at Hanuman House for ever and that the Tulsis would soon set him up in a shop in a village called "The Chase". Tara also said that they had told her that Mr. Biswas had not wanted any dowry or a big wedding ceremonial because it was a love-match. Mr. Biswas was stunned to hear this. He told Tara that it was not a love-match in any sense of the word and that they had told a lie. Tara said that they had shown her a love-letter which he had written to Shama. Tara then suggested that he should go back to his wife at Hanuman House. And so back to Hanuman House Mr. Biswas went.

An Exchange of Sarcastic Remarks

Nobody at Hanuman House showed much interest in Mr. Biswas's return. Seth and Mrs. Tulsi hardly took any notice of him. Shama taunted him on his return and asked if he had come back

after feeling tired of catching crabs in Pagotes. Crab-catching was one of the lowest occupations. Mr. Biswas, replying, said that he had come back because he wanted to help the whole Tulsi family in catching crabs at this place. His reply silenced Shama and also the others who heard his remark.

Mr. Biswas's Encounter With Misir, a Newspaper Correspondent

Mr. Biswas now resumed his sign-writing and spent as much time as he could out of the house. But there was not much work to do, and so he found himself idling away much of his time. One day he met another under-employed man, whose name was Misir. Misir was the Arwacas correspondent of a newspaper called the *Trinidad Sentinel*. The two men discussed employment opportunities; they discussed Hinduism; they discussed India; and they discussed their respective families. Misir's job did not occupy him all the time.

The Disharmony Between Mr. Biswas and Shama

Mr. Biswas found it impossible to develop any intimacy with Shama. In fact, there was a mutual feeling of antagonism between her and him. He would often taunt her on her family, and she too would speak to him with an under-current of bitterness. He would refer to her two brothers as "the little gods", to Seth as "the big boss", and to Mrs. Tulsi as "the old queen". On one occasion he asked Shama how the old hen, the old cow, was getting on. His reference was to Mrs. Tulsi. Shama replied that he had no right to talk about her family in this manner because nobody had particularly asked him to get married into the Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas said that there was no reason at all for Shama to feel proud of her family because in reality it was not a family at all. He said that he was hoping that one day he would spit on some members of this family. To this, Shama replied that no member of the Tulsi family would care even to spit on any member of his family which was far inferior to the former. Having lost his identity to a great extent, Mr. Biswas found his life in Hanuman House one of great stress and strain because almost every one was hostile to him. So he started looking for allies.

Mr. Biswas's Ill-Conceived Attempt to Win Govind As an Ally

Mr. Biswas selected Chinta's husband Govind, who had once been a coconut-seller, as a possible ally. So one day he started talking to Govind about the Tulsi family. Govind had nothing to say against the Tulsis. On the contrary, Govind suggested that Mr. Biswas should give up his sign-painting and should become a supervisor under Seth and work on the Tulsi estate. Mr. Biswas said that he could not give up his independence because his motto was: "Paddle your own canoe". Mr. Biswas then said that the Tulsis were blood-suckers and that he would rather catch crabs or sell coconuts

than work under any of the Tulsis. Mr. Biswas next spoke in a mocking tone about the two Tulsi sons to whom he referred as "the little gods". Govind communicated to Seth all that Mr. Biswas had said. Mr. Biswas had never thought that Govind would go so far as to expose him to the Tulsis. Mr. Biswas was summoned by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi. The two Tulsi sons were also present. Seth said that Mr. Biswas had referred to him (Seth) as "the big boss", to Mrs. Tulsi as "the old hen", and to the two boys as "the little gods". Seth reminded Mr. Biswas that the latter had come to this house as a penniless stranger and that the Tulsis had not only received him well but had given him one of their daughters in marriage. He said that they were feeding Mr. Biswas and that they had given him a place to sleep in. Seth accused Mr. Biswas of rank ingratitude. Seth also made fun of Mr. Biswas for having said that he would paddle his own canoe. Seth asked how far his paddling had taken him. The younger son at this stage expressed his own resentment against Mr. Biswas and said that his mother had committed a terrible blunder in choosing Mr. Biswas as a son-in-law. He said that Mr. Biswas should apologize to Mrs. Tulsi for having called her an old hen.

Mr. Biswas, Indignant

At this point Mr. Biswas abruptly lost his temper and shouted that all of them could go to hell and that he was not going to apologize to anybody. He then ran up the stairs to his room where he began to pack up his belongings. However, his anger subsided when he realized that his leaving so soon after having returned to the house only a few days before would appear to be absurd. Before he could decide whether to quit or to remain, Seth's wife Padma came upstairs to him in the company of C (that is Chinta, the wife of Govind). They both appealed to him not to leave, and Mr. Biswas felt that it would be expedient for him to agree to remain.

Mr. Biswas's Interest in Hari, Another Brother-in-Law

Having been disappointed in Govind, Mr. Biswas now began to find some merit in those brothers-in-law whom he had previously ignored. One of his brothers-in-law was a man called Hari, a quiet man who spent much time at the long table working through mounds of rice in a slow and unenthusiastic way. This man spent even more time in the latrine, with the result that the others had to wait patiently for him to come out. It was generally believed that Hari was a sick man. Although he had to work on the Tulsi estate like the others, he was in fact a pundit by training and inclination. He always felt very happy when he changed from his working clothes into a *dhoti* and sat in the verandha, reading from some huge Hindi book. He was obsessed with his sickness, his food, and his religious books.

Mr. Biswas's Interest in Arya Samaj

Approaching Hari one day, Mr. Biswas asked him what he thought about the Aryans. Hari showed no interest at all in this

reference to the Aryans. By the Aryans, Mr. Biswas meant followers of the Arya Samaj. He was referring to the protestant Hindu missionaries who had gone to Trinidad from India and were preaching the reforms which Arya Samaj advocated. These missionaries taught that caste was unimportant, that Hinduism should accept converts, that idol-worship should be abolished, that women should be educated, and so on. Mr. Biswas himself had already adopted these new principles. It was Misir, the part-time journalist, who had encouraged Mr. Biswas to adopt these views. Misir also advised Mr. Biswas to go and hear the Aryan missionary by the name of Pankaj Rai whom he described as a "purist" and a real orator.

Mr. Biswas's Visit to an Aryan Missionary

In accordance with Misir's advice, Mr. Biswas went to the home of the Nath family with whom Pankaj Rai was staying. Mr. Biswas felt even more eager to go there because there was a keen business rivalry between the Naths and the Tulsis. Mr. Biswas, after listening to Pankaj Rai's lecture, felt that he agreed with almost everything that the missionary had said. When he came back to Hanuman House, he told Shama that, if Pankaj Rai's opinion about the Tulsis were asked, Pankaj Rai would say that a man like Seth was no better than a bull and that such a man should be made a cowherd. Shama told Mr. Biswas to shut his mouth.

The Aryan Missionary's Misconduct

About a week later, Seth met Mr. Biswas in the hall of Hanuman House and asked in a laughing manner how Mr. Biswas's dear friend Pankaj Rai was getting on. Mr. Biswas said that Seth should address his question to Hari, the star-gazer. Seth thereupon told Mr. Biswas that Pankaj Rai had narrowly escaped being sent to prison. Seth said that Pankaj Rai had tried to make love to Nath's daughter-in-law and had been turned out of their house. Seth expressed the view that a follower of Arya Samaj could not be trusted with a woman. Seth said that he felt like cutting off the balls of all the Aryans.

Mr. Biswas's Sarcasmic Remarks About the Tulsi Family

Mr. Biswas had by now become confirmed in his habit of making sarcastic remarks about the members of the Tulsi household. He referred to Hari as "the constipated holy man". He said that Shama's two brothers looked like two monkeys. He called Hanuman House a real zoo where all kinds of animals dwelt. In retaliation, Shama called Mr. Biswas a barking puppy dog whereupon Mr. Biswas said that a dog was man's best friend.

A New Aryan Preacher

Pankaj Rai's place as a preacher of Aryan views was taken by a professor by the name of Shivlochan who spoke pompous Hindi

but very little English. Shivlochan was all the time bullied by Misir who imposed his own ideas upon Shivlochan with regard to the procedures to be adopted for the preaching of Aryan reforms. Misir suggested persuasion as a means of advocating the reforms. Shivlochan said that the persuasion should be peaceful. Misir said that, if peaceful persuasion failed, they should not hesitate to use the sword. Shivlochan replied that, in using the sword, they would be deviating from the holy doctrine of non-violence. In his private discussion with Mr. Biswas, Misir spoke of the orthodox system of arranged marriages as mere "cat-in-bag", meaning that a man could never judge what kind of a wife he was going to get. His own marriage, said Misir, was a concrete example of the system of cat-in-bag.

A Widening of Differences Between Mr. Biswas and Seth

The people who had already become converted to the views of the Arya Samaj formed an association called Arwacas Aryan Association (the A.A.A.). This association passed a resolution that peaceful persuasion should be followed by militant conversion, even though Shivlochan had opposed it. On the following day, a news-item appeared in the *Trinidad Sentinel* announcing this resolution. Mr. Biswas's name was given as one of the supporters of the resolution. On reading this news-item, Seth told Mr. Biswas that the latter was disgracing the family and that Mr. Biswas's views would greatly hurt the education of the Tulsi sons who were studying in a Roman Catholic College. Seth asked Mr. Biswas if he really believed that girls should be educated and should be allowed to choose their own husbands. Seth then taunted Mr. Biswas on Mr. Biswas's sister Dehuti having run away with a servant. Mr. Biswas retorted that his sister was happier in her married life than anybody in Hanuman House and that she was living in a house which was much cleaner than this place. Seth thereupon told his sister-in-law, Mrs. Tulsi, that in having Mr. Biswas in their house they had accepted a serpent. Mr. Biswas said that he was not going to stay on in this house. He said that, while offering Shama to him in marriage, the family had promised to do many things for him but had actually done nothing. He said that he would leave this house on the day they carried out their promises to him.

Christian Pamphlets Brought by Mr. Biswas to Hanuman House

The Arwacas Aryan Association attracted the attention of Mrs. Weir, the wife of the owner of a small sugar-estate. She was particularly interested in Hinduism. She started inviting members of the association to her house. At the same time that she discussed the reforms advocated by the Aryans, she distributed certain books and pamphlets among those who came to her house. The books and pamphlets related to a certain Christian sect. When Mr. Biswas brought some of the pamphlets to Hanuman House, Seth accused

him of trying to convert Hindus to Christianity. Mr. Biswas said that some persons in this household were already Christians. His reference was to the two Tulsi boys who were studying in a Roman Catholic College. He was also referring to the elder Tulsi boy wearing a crucifix. (The elder boy actually wore a crucifix as a charm against evil). Mrs. Tulsi, on hearing her sons described as Christians, fainted.

The Attentions, Paid to Mrs. Tulsi During Her Fainting Fits

Mrs. Tulsi often fainted. Whenever this happened, an elaborate procedure was regularly adopted. One daughter was sent to get a particular room, called the Rose Room, ready; and Mrs. Tulsi was taken there by the other daughters working under the instructions of Padma, the wife of Seth. If Padma was herself ill on such an occasion, her place was taken by Sushila, a widowed daughter of Mrs. Tulsi. Sushila's only child had died, and she was respected in the house because of this misfortune. In the Rose Room, one daughter fanned Mrs. Tulsi, two others massaged her legs; and one massaged her forehead. The other daughters* stood by, ready to carry out the instructions of Padma or Sushila. The gods, namely the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi, were there as well in case they were at home. On this occasion when Mrs. Tulsi fainted, Mr. Biswas remained in his own room, thinking over the subjects for the articles he had promised to write for an Aryan magazine which Misir planned to bring out. Shama came to him and asked him if he was happy to make Mai faint. (Mrs. Tulsi was generally referred to, and addressed as, "Mai" by her daughters and others. ("Mai" means "mother").

Mrs. Tulsi, Regarded as a She-Fox by Mr. Biswas

Next morning, Mr. Biswas went down into the hall and wished good morning to everybody, though he got no reply. He then asked Mrs. Tulsi if she was feeling better, and she replied that she was surely feeling better. Later, alone with Shama, Mr. Biswas said that he had been wrong about her mother and that she was neither an old hen nor an old cow but a she-fox.

Mr. Biswas, Not a Believer in Idol-Worship

The younger god, namely, Mrs. Tulsi younger son, was performing the *pūja* and, in the course of this ritual, he took a brass plate with a piece of burning camphor on it to Mrs. Tulsi who touched the camphor flame with her finger-tips and lifted her finger-tips to her forehead. She then directed him to take the holy brass plate to his brother-in-law Mohun (that is, Mr. Biswas). However, when the young man came to Mr. Biswas, the latter refused to touch

*We shall be told later that Mrs. Tulsi was the mother of fourteen daughters, besides two sons.

the camphor flame saying that he did not believe in this kind of idol-worship. He had already been deeply influenced by the views of Arya Samajis.

Mr. Biswas's Misbehaviour

That day when Shama brought him his food consisting of rice, curried potatoes, lentils, and coconut sauce, Mr. Biswas told her that he hated to be served his food in a brass plate, and that, in any case, the food which she had brought for him was extremely distasteful to him. Both rice and potatoes were starch which would fatten his belly still more, he said. Shama replied that he should complain about the food only when he had himself to pay for it. The implication of her remark was that he was being supported and fed by his mother-in-law. Mr. Biswas then went to the window, washed his hands, gargled, and spat. Someone from below shouted that the water thrown out by Mr. Biswas had fallen upon him. Looking downwards, Mr. Biswas found that the water had fallen on Owad, one of the two gods. Owad, looking upwards, threatened to go and tell his mother about Mr. Biswas's misbehaviour. Mr. Biswas then picked up the brass plate and, going to the window, spilled the food which also fell upon Owad who was shocked at this action of Mr. Biswas's. Owad shouted to his mother to come and see what her son-in-law had done to him. A regular commotion now followed downstairs. Several persons were shouting at once; babies were screaming; and there was a lot of subsidiary bawling and chattering.

Mr. Biswas, Thrashed by Govind

Govind, one of the sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi and the man who had already reported Mr. Biswas's insulting remarks about the family to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, learnt at this stage what had happened. Govind rushed up the stairs and, seizing Mr. Biswas, started giving him powerful blows and, with every blow, Govind asked how Mr. Biswas had dared to misbehave in that outrageous manner. Others also now climbed up the stairs and, seeing Mr. Biswas being beaten mercilessly, shouted that Govind should be stopped. Govind's wife Chinta cried that Govind would kill Mr. Biswas if nobody intervened. Owad, on the contrary, felt happy to see this sight and said: "Kill him, kill him, Uncle Govind". Mr. Biswas, who had badly been thrashed, said that he was about to die. Hearing these words, Govind suddenly stopped.

Comforters and Challengers

Padma now rushed towards Mr. Biswas and began to nurse his injuries. She brought coconut oil, vaporub, garlic, and raw vegetables. Chinta (generally known as C) sobbed to see Mr. Biswas's condition. Shama maintained a martyr's attitude throughout the whole episode. Owad challenged Mr. Biswas to try spitting

upon him again. Govind said that nobody could insult Owad and Mai so long as he was in the house.

Mr. Biswas, Annoyed With Shama

When the incident was over, and Mr. Biswas was alone with Shama, he asked her to go and bring him a tin of Canadian salmon,* and also some bread and pepper-sauce. Shama asked him if he was pregnant and was having a craving for such foods as salmon and pepper-sauce. When he repeated his order to her, she said that he could go himself and get these things because she was not going to be ordered about by him. Mr. Biswas thereupon went downstairs where the chattering of the family had now taken the form of a babel.** Addressing the whole gathering, he said that he would no longer be eating any food in this house because the food was so bad that it was not acceptable to him. Mr. Biswas then went out and ate oysters at a cafe where he paid thirteen cents for the twenty-six oysters eaten by him. He then bought a tin of salmon and two loaves of bread. The taste of both the salmon and the loaves showed that they were stale, but he felt compelled to eat to the end.

Expulsion Orders by Seth Against Mr. Biswas

The next morning Mr. Biswas was summoned by Seth who said that he had come back late last night from the estate, and that the first thing he had heard was that Mr. Biswas had grossly misbehaved towards Owad. Seth said that the family could no longer tolerate Mr. Biswas. Seth reminded Mr. Biswas of his having said on a previous occasion that he wanted to paddle his own canoe. Mr. Biswas could now go ahead and paddle, said Seth. Seth also said that, in case Mr. Biswas failed to paddle his canoe, he should not come back to him or to Mai. Seth further warned him that he should go away before doing any more mischief and before it became necessary for Seth himself to thrash Mr. Biswas. So Mr. Biswas moved to The Chase to take charge of the Tulsi shop there. Shama was pregnant when they moved.

PART I, CHAPTER IV

THE CHASE

A Settlement of Mud-Huts

The Chase was a settlement of mud-huts in the heart of the sugarcane area. Few outsiders went to The Chase. The people who lived there worked on the estates and the roads. The Chase had neither a police station nor a school. Its two most important public buildings were the two rum-shops. And there were a large number of small food-shops too. It was one of these food-and-provision

*Salmon is a kind of fish. It is a table delicacy.

**Babel—confused talk; several persons talking at the same time and confusing one another.

shops of which Mr. Biswas was now to take charge. This shop was a small, narrow room with a rusty galvanized iron roof. The Tulsis had bought this property on the advice of Seth who was a member of a Local Road Board and who had thought that the price of the property would soon rise appreciably, though this did not happen.

Arrival At The Chase

Mr. Biswas moved from Hanuman House without much trouble, because he did not have any belongings which he could call his own. What he had to carry from Hanuman House hardly filled a donkey-cart. His arrival at The Chase in Shama's company was noted by a waiting crowd with pity and some hostility. The hostility came from the rival shop-keepers. Mr. Biswas found that the shop which he was to run had remained closed for several months.

The Interior of the Shop-Cum-House

On entering the shop and finding it in a dilapidated condition, Mr. Biswas said that it was the sort of place which needed to be built up. Shama started sobbing when she saw herself in this alien environment. She taunted Mr. Biswas on his having said that he wanted to paddle his own canoe. Mr. Biswas wanted to comfort Shama, but he needed comfort himself because he found the shop not only to be a lonely place but a frightening one. In one of the back rooms he found a large iron four-poster* which was full of bugs. Another piece of furniture which came with the shop was a small kitchen-table. That night when Shama cooked the food for Mr. Biswas and for herself, Mr. Biswas thought that a miracle had been performed. He could not look at the meal as simply food. For the first time a meal had been prepared in a house which was his own.**

Mr. Biswas's Hope

In a few weeks the house became cleaner and habitable. The atmosphere of decay and disuse was, to a large extent, dispelled. Besides, Mr. Biswas had the comforting thought that he would not have to live here for ever. The Chase, he believed, was only a transitional period, a pause, a preparation for the better life to come.

A House-Blessing Ceremony, Proposed by Shama

Mr. Biswas now became a shopkeeper, and he found that seelling was not at all a difficult job. At the end of the first month he found that he had made a big profit of thirty-seven dollars. He knew nothing about keeping accounts. It was Shama who made various suggestions about how to stock the goods, and it was she who started keeping accounts. However, they were as yet unused to their new relationship and, though they did not now

*Four-Poster—a bed with four posts to support it. (A post is a wooden pole or a stout and vertical piece of timber).

**Actually the house was purchased from the Foundation, Chandigarh.

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quarrel, their talk remained business-like and impersonal. One evening Shama suggested that they should have a house-blessing ceremony and that Hari should be invited to perform the ceremony of blessing the shop and the house. She said that all members of the Tulsi family should be invited to attend the holy ritual. Mr. Biswas was astonished by Shama's suggestion, and he lost his temper completely. He asked her if she thought him to be a Maharaja. He asked why he should get Hari and all the others to come and bless this place. He said that the kind of ceremony suggested by her would prove to be a very expensive affair. During the next several days Shama showed her resentment in various ways. For the first time Mr. Biswas learnt how a woman nagged. Then there was her pregnancy which too made Mr. Biswas uneasy. At the end, Mr. Biswas felt compelled to accept the suggestion made by Shama about the house-blessing ceremony.

The Arrival of Guests For the House-Blessing Ceremony

Shama's sisters arrived at The Chase three days before the house-blessing ceremony. On the day fixed for the ceremony, all other members of the Tulsi clan came except Seth, Miss Blackie, and the two gods (namely, the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi). Mrs. Tulsi explained that Owad and Shekhar (her two sons) had not been able to come because they were at school. Hari, the holy man, was to act as the pundit at the ceremony. He greeted Mr. Biswas without any ill-will but also without any pleasure or interest. Children, most of whom Mr. Biswas could not connect with their parents, were present in their full strength. Chinta and Padma inquired about Mr. Biswas's health but without showing any warmth or feeling. Sushila, the childless widow, was enjoying one of her periods of authority. Mr. Biswas felt that, in the midst of this crowd of guests, he was a stranger in his own house. But he asked himself if this house was his own. Mrs. Tulsi and Sushila did not appear to think so. The villagers also did not think so. The villagers had always referred to this shop as the Tulsi shop, even after he had painted a sign with his own name as the proprietor of the shop and had hung the sign above the shop-door.

A Mother's Grievance Against Mr. Biswas

One bed-room had been reserved for Hari and the other for Mrs. Tulsi. And the shop was full of babies. Mr. Biswas now did not know where he should take shelter. He stood outside the shop, fondling his belly under his shirt and thinking of the quarrel which he would have with Shama afterwards. A little later, Mr. Biswas found that a group of children, in the course of their games, were breaking the sodawater bottles in order to take out the marbles from their necks. He lifted one of the boys by the collar to warn him, whereupon the boy began to bawl. At this all the children began to bawl. The boy's mother arrived on the scene and gave a good beating to the boy, at the same time saying that now everybody would be pleased. Mr. Biswas said that each bottle had cost him

eight cents. The mother continued to beat the boy and said : "Good ! Everyone is satisfied now. And I suppose the soda water bottles have been made whole again. Nobody is losing eight cents a bottle now." The mother's remarks were obviously addressed to Mr. Biswas who had complained about the damage being done to his property. Mr. Biswas replied that he had not asked her to beat her child.

Preparations for the Ceremony

Outside the shop a crowd had collected. The villagers had come to receive the food that was to be distributed after the house-blessing ceremony. Among these uninvited guests were two of the village shopkeepers. The cooking was being done under the supervision of Sushila. Some of the women had stayed awake all the previous night, peeling potatoes, cutting vegetables, cleaning rice, singing, and drinking coffee. Mr. Biswas had given up working out the cost of the entire ceremony because he felt that the ceremony would leave him a pauper.

A Conversation Between Mr. Biswas and Mrs. Tulsi

Mrs. Tulsi told Mr. Biswas that he had a nice little property now. Mr. Biswas replied that the walls of this property were crumbling. Mrs. Tulsi said that the house would not collapse. Mr. Biswas said that the roof of the bed-room was leaking. Mrs. Tulsi replied that rainfall was not a continuous phenomenon. Mr. Biswas said that a new kitchen was needed. Mrs. Tulsi replied that the existing kitchen seemed to her to be perfectly all right. Mr. Biswas said that the accommodation was not enough and that an extra room was needed. Mrs. Tulsi replied that it seemed to her that he wanted a Hanuman House at the very beginning of his new career. Mr. Biswas said that he did not want a Hanuman House at all. Mrs. Tulsi said that he could have an extra room by hanging some sugarsacks at night on the posts in the gallery. During the day the sugarsacks, she said, could be removed so that the gallery could return to its original condition. Mr. Biswas asked if she would send him some sugarsacks. Mrs. Tulsi replied that he himself, being a shopkeeper, had more sugarsacks than she had. Mr. Biswas said that he was just joking and that he would be satisfied if she could send him a coal barrel in which his whole family could live. He went on to say that no family should build a house these days because a coal barrel could easily accommodate it. Whenever a baby was born, an additional coal barrel could be obtained. Mrs. Tulsi thereupon turned her back on Mr. Biswas and left him.

Loss of Business After the Home-Blessing Ceremony

The ceremony of house-blessing over, the Tulsi family left for Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas found that his financial resources had considerably been depleted. What was worse, the sales at the shop now fell. One of the shopkeepers who had been in the shop since Mr. Biswas had fed at the

ceremony, sold his establishment, and another man moved in. The new shopkeeper's business prospered. Mr. Biswas told his wife that the house-blessing ceremony had led to his losing many of his customers. Shama replied that the reason for his loss of business was that he had been giving too much credit to his customers and that, not wanting to pay him what they owed, they had stopped coming to him and had started going to the new shopkeeper. Mr. Biswas said that he could not go and beat the customers who had stopped coming to him. Mr. Biswas then asked if it was possible for them to invite Hari again to this place and to ask him to un-bless the house so that the customers could start coming back here.

Shama, Back at Hanuman House For the Delivery

Shama was now a changed woman. At Hanuman House she had seemed to be an irresponsible person, a kind of prankster.* Now she seemed much more responsible. She was now a wife and a housekeeper. She was also now nearing the time of her delivery. When the day of delivery approached, Shama went to Hanuman House. Sushila and Chinta had come to take her away. Before leaving, Shama made certain arrangements so that Mr. Biswas should not experience much difficulty with regard to his food and clothes.

A Daughter, Named Savi

During his leisure hours now, Mr. Biswas would think of the name he should give to the child who was coming into the world. He thought only of male names because he never visualized that he would get a daughter. He had decided that his son would be given a name of his own choice and that no pundit would have anything to do with it. He wrote down in a book the various names which occurred to him. In the event, Shama was blessed with a daughter and not with a son. When Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House to see Shama and the baby, he found that his daughter had already been named. The child had been given the name "Savi" by Seth and Hari. Mr. Biswas said that he had spent much time on thinking about a name for his daughter and that he had ultimately decided on Sarojini Lakshmi Kamala Devi. Shama said that the name "Savi" had already been registered with the government office which issued birth certificates. Mr. Biswas, looking at the official document which Shama showed him, found that the name specified there was not "Savi" but "Basso". Shama explained that Basso was the real name of the baby and that Savi was only the calling name. As a protest against these names, Mr. Biswas wrote down Lakshmi as the girl's name on the official document after deleting Basso. Mr. Biswas also protested against his occupation having been specified in the official document as that of a labourer. He told Shama that he was not a labourer but a painter. Shama said that, if she had got the word "painter" written on the official document, it would have seemed

*Prankster—one who indulges in mischief; one who plays tricks.
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that he was a house-painter (one who white-washed the walls of houses). Thereupon Mr. Biswas wrote down the word "proprietor" on the birth certificate after deleting the word "labourer". Shama, said that he could not call himself a proprietor because the shop belonged not to him but to Mai (that is, Mrs. Tulsi). Mr. Biswas said that, in any case, he was not a labourer.

Life, Full of Surprises, According to Mrs. Tulsi

Mr. Biswas went down the stairs into the hall, expecting that he would receive due attention from the whole family as the father of the latest baby in Hanuman House. But no one particularly looked at him. The hall was full of children who were eating something rather reluctantly. Mr. Biswas found that they were eating sulphur mixed with condensed milk. Mrs. Tulsi explained that sulphur mixed with condensed milk was an excellent cure for eczema. Mrs. Tulsi then said that, a year before, Mr. Biswas could not have imagined that one day he would be sitting here in this hall, with these children, as her son-in-law and as a father. She said that life was full of such surprises. She then pointed out that, having become a father, he would now be responsible for the life of another human being, namely his daughter. And then Mrs. Tulsi went on to speak, in a philosophic manner, of how Fate decided everything that happened in the lives of human beings. Then Seth appeared on the scene and he said that Mr. Biswas was now a big man, a husband and a father. He then asked if the shop, of which Mr. Biswas was in charge, had become bankrupt or not. Mr. Biswas said that Seth should wait for a little more time, after which the shop would certainly go bankrupt. After all, said Mr. Biswas, only four months had passed since Hari had blessed the shop. That blessing had surely sealed the fate of the shop, he meant to say.

A Pig With Two Heads : Mr. Biswas's Revenge

After leaving Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas cycled to Misir's house where he learnt that Misir had packed his wife and children off to his mother-in law. Mr. Biswas could guess that the reason for Misir's sending away his family was either a quarrel between Misir and his wife or the pregnancy of Misir's wife. Misir said that he had been working very hard in the absence of his family and that he had written a few short story stories some of which he then narrated to Mr. Biswas, though very briefly. Misir suggested that Mr. Biswas should also start writing stories. Mr. Biswas replied that he did not have the time because he had now acquired a little property in a village called The Chase and that he had now more responsibilities because he had got a daughter. Misir said that having children was all that a husband got from this cat-in-bag business. ("Cat-in-bag" was a phrase which Misir had coined to describe the custom of a man's being married to a woman without his having any previous knowledge of the woman). Mr. Biswas then asked Misir how the Arya Samaj was getting on in Trinidad. Misir replied that the Arya Samaj had been sent back to

India and that Shivlochan was proving himself to be a damned fool. Mr. Biswas asked if Misir was still working as a correspondent for the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Mr. Misir replied in the affirmative. Mr. Biswas thereupon said that the Tulsi family at Hanuman House had got a pig with two heads and that the pig had subsequently died. On the next day a news-item appeared in the *Trinidad Sentinel* about the Tulsi family having got a pig with two heads. This was how Mr. Biswas avenged himself upon the Tulsi family who was responsible for having described him as a labourer to the authorities.

Bathing and Massaging the Baby

After a few weeks Shama returned to the shop in The Chase. Mr. Biswas tried to call the baby Lakshmi, but Shama insisted that the correct name of the baby was Savi; and so the girl remained Savi. Mr. Biswas liked to watch when Savi was bathed because Shama did this job of bathing the child in an expert manner. It seemed that Shama had been bathing babies for years. After the bath, Savi was rubbed with coconut oil. This routine was gone through in the evening as well as in the morning.

A Visit to the Shop By a Man Called Moti

Six months passed. One day a man called Moti came to Mr. Biswas's shop and asked for a little lard.* Being a Hindu, Mr. Biswas did not stock lard. He offered butter instead of lard. But Moti did not want butter. Moti said that some Hindu shopkeepers in the village were selling not only lard but beef, just to earn a few extra cents. Mr. Biswas said that he wished that he could do the same because he did not have any religious scruples in this matter. Moti then mentioned a man called Seebaran. Moti said that this man was handling practically all the legal work in the Petty Civil Court and that he was one of the best lawyers. Moti then said that most of Mr. Biswas's previous customers were now patronizing a different shop. The reason for this, said Moti, was that those customers had been buying things from Mr. Biswas on credit and that, not wishing to pay him what they owed, they had begun to patronize the other shop. Moti particularly named a man called Mungroo who never repaid the loans which he owed to people. The upshot of this whole talk by Moti was that Mr. Biswas agreed to hire the services of the lawyer Seebaran and to file law-suits against those who owed him money, and especially against Mungroo who had taken plenty of stuff from Mr. Biswas's shop on credit. When Moti was gone, Mr. Biswas told Shama that he was going to teach persons like Mungroo a lesson. Shama said that, before taking legal action against the defaulters, Mr. Biswas should have consulted somebody more experienced. Mr. Biswas asked if he should have consulted the old thug (meaning Seth) and the old she-fox (meaning Mrs. Tulsi).

*Lard—pig's fat, used in cooking.

Mungroo's Unpaid Bills

Mungroo was the leader of the village stick-fighters. He was a tall, ill-tempered man with a fierce look. In wielding a stick, he was a champion. It was he who had organized the young men of The Chase into a fighting squad, ready to defend the honour of the village on the days of the Christmas festival and the Muslim Hosein. By profession Mungroo was a road-mender. He always said that he worked for the government, but actually he did not work at all. He made it clear that the village should pay for his maintenance because he had undertaken the responsibility to defend the honour of the village. Mr. Biswas had been an admirer of Mungroo, and he had therefore never refused credit to him. But Mungroo had gradually become more demanding. Mr. Biswas had thereupon complained to the other customers who passed on Mr. Biswas's words to Mungroo himself. Mungroo thereupon stopped speaking to Mr. Biswas. The result was that Mungroo's bills remained unpaid, and further that Mr. Biswas lost a few more customers in the process.

Mr. Biswas's Quarrel With Shama Over His Notice to Mungroo

Moti one day came again and told Mr. Biswas that the lawyer Seebaran had been kind enough to accept Mr. Biswas as his client because Moti had told the lawyer that Mr. Biswas was a very good Hindu and because Seebaran himself was a devout Hindu. Moti then took out a few papers and got Mr. Biswas's signatures on the dotted line below the legal wording which was a notice to Mungroo to pay his bills. Moti, however, pointed out that, the bills not having been signed by Mungroo, Mr. Biswas's case was not very strong. Moti then asked for five dollars as Seebaran's fee, and Mr. Biswas paid the amount. When Moti had left, Mr. Biswas found that Shama was annoyed with him for the procedure he had adopted to recover the money from customers like Mungroo. Mr. Biswas told her that he was his own boss, and that she had no business to criticize his actions. Mr. Biswas knew that those of the Tulsi daughters, who lived with their husbands away from Hanuman House, often went back to Mrs. Tulsi after a quarrel with their husbands and got the sympathy of their mother and their uncle Seth. Seeing that Shama was now in that mood, he asked her to pack up and go to the monkey-house where she would receive a medal for her loyalty to her family. Shama packed up and left for Hanuman House.

Mungroo's Threatening Attitude Towards Mr. Biswas

The day came when Mungroo was served with a notice from Seebaran who was acting on behalf of Mr. Biswas. Mungroo became furious. Holding the notice in his hands, he went to Mr. Biswas's shop and shouted to Mr. Biswas to come out. A crowd gathered outside the shop. Mungroo said that he would make Mr. Biswas eat that piece of paper. Mr. Biswas, standing in front of his shop, said that, if Mungroo dared to touch him, he would report

A CHAPTER-WISE SUMMARY

the matter to the police and would see to it that Mungroo spent Christmas in jail. This threat by Mr. Biswas produced an electric effect on Mungroo. Christmas was less than a month away, and that was the time when he used to emerge as the most important person in the village. Mungroo therefore controlled himself and allowed his followers to push him slowly back and then to take him away.

A Disastrous Turn to Mr. Biswas's Case Against Mungroo

A week later, Moti came to see Mr. Biswas again. This time Moti gave Mr. Biswas a paper which, Moti said, was a notice to him from the Attorney-General. Mungroo had engaged a solicitor by the name of Mahmoud who had sent this notice through the Attorney-General. Mungroo in his complaint to the Attorney-General had said that Mr. Biswas had damaged his credit in the village market. Mr. Biswas asked how Mungroo could prosecute him for damaging his credit when it was obvious that Mungroo had failed to pay the money which he owed to Mr. Biswas against the goods which he had been buying on credit. Moti said that none of the bills, which Mr. Biswas had in his possession, had been signed by Mungroo. Moti said that he had pointed out to Mr. Biswas in the very beginning that the bills, being unsigned, did not carry their full weight. Moti now said that, in Seebaran's opinion, the dispute with Mungroo should be settled out of court because Mr. Biswas did not have much chance of winning the case inside the court. Mr. Biswas then learnt with surprise that a discussion had already taken place between the lawyer Mahmoud and the lawyer Seebaran and that a provisional settlement had been reached out of court. Moti informed Mr. Biswas that Mungroo was willing to withdraw his suit against Mr. Biswas if Mr. Biswas paid him a sum of one hundred dollars as compensation. The fees of both the lawyers amounted to another hundred dollars. Mr. Biswas asked what would happen if the other customers, to whom he had sent notices, were also to retaliate in the manner in which Mungroo had done. Moti's reply was that Mr. Biswas should not contemplate this possibility because it would simply cause him too much worry and anxiety. Mr. Biswas thereupon cycled to Hanuman House to ask Shama to come back. He did not tell her what had happened. His main anxiety now was to arrange for money to pay Mungroo. It was not from Mrs. Tulsi or Mr. Seth that he wanted to borrow any money. So he contacted Misir who, in addition to his journalistic, literary, and religious activities, had become a money-lender with a capital of two hundred dollars. Mr. Biswas spent more than half the time that remained to him at The Chase in paying off the loan which he obtained from Misir.

Mr. Biswas's Fits of Depression

In all, Mr. Biswas lived at The Chase for six years. But during this period he had aged. He had always suffered from indigestion

ever since the time when he had been forced to eat too many bananas. Maclean's Stomach Powder had become a part of the routine of his life. He had now given up reading Samuel Smiles because this author depressed him too much. He turned to religion and philosophy. He took to reading Marcus Aurelius* and Epictetus.** He also began to read books dealing with Christianity. Occasionally he felt like leaving the shop, leaving Shama, leaving the children, and going away to some unknown place. There were whole weeks when he indulged in some kind of eccentric behaviour. For instance, on one occasion he allowed his nails to grow to an extreme length, which he then held up to surprise and startle his customers. On another occasion he applied healing ointments of various colours to his face and stood in the shop doorway accosting persons who passed that way. He did such things when Shama was away to Hanuman House.

A Son, Born to Mr. Biswas

Three years after Savi's birth, Shama gave birth to a son. At Seth's suggestion, the boy was given the name of Anand. Then it was Anand who travelled with Shama from Hanuman House to The Chase, and from The Chase to Hanuman House. Savi stayed at Hanuman House on a permanent basis. The number of children at Hanuman House went on increasing in this way. Fresh children were born to the resident daughters. A son-in-law who lived at a different place died, and his family also came to live at Hanuman House permanently.

Mr. Biswas's Changed Attitude to Hanuman House

Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House regularly in order to see Savi. Savi had no taste for fish, but her grandmother, Mrs. Tulsi, had been able to induce Savi to eat fish regularly because fish was good for the brain. Mr. Biswas realized that at Hanuman House children were regarded as assets and as a source of future wealth and influence. Mr. Biswas also realized that Hanuman House was not a chaotic place as he had thought. He found that there was a regular hierarchy, with Mrs. Tulsi and Seth at the top, followed by Padma, Chinta, Shama, and others, with Mr. Biswas himself at the bottom. Hanuman House now seemed to Mr. Biswas a world more real than The Chase. He felt that he needed such a place of refuge. In course of time Hanuman House became to him what Tara's house had been when he was a boy. He could go to Hanuman House whenever he wished and become lost in the crowd there because he was now treated by his relations with indifference rather than with hostility. And so he now started going there more often. He would now hold his tongue and try to win favour, instead of insulting everybody.

*an ancient Roman emperor.

**an ancient Greek philosopher.

Mr. Biswas's Fears About the Future

On certain occasions, the members of the Tulsi family provoked him in order to hear pungent remarks from him and, when he made such remarks, everybody laughed. The gods were away most of the time, and he seldom saw them. But when he did see them he felt glad because his relationship with them had also changed and he regarded them as the only persons with whom he could have any serious conversation. He had now dropped his prejudice against idol-worship, and he discussed religion with these boys. It was soon recognized that Mr. Biswas, like Hari, was too intelligent a man to be asked to do the menial jobs of the kind which the other brothers-in-law were required to do. Mr. Biswas was often deputed to have discussions with the learned pundits in the drawing-room. In spite of everything, however, his thoughts about the future never left him. He feared the future. And often, among the pundits and the cushions in the drawing-room, eating the sumptuous meals which the Tulsis provided on these occasions, he was overcome by a sense of utter desolation. Then he tried to console himself by thinking of the blessings which he enjoyed. At the same time in his private conversations with Shama at The Chase, he continued to talk in a sarcastic manner about the Tulsi family. In fact, he had begun to think that she was plotting to take him back to Hanuman House in order to live there.

A Serious Quarrel Between Mr. Biswas and Shama

At last Shama told Mr. Biswas that she could no longer live at The Chase. She said that she wanted him to give up the shop and return to Hanuman House. This reopened all their old quarrels. The only difference was that now everything which Shama said was true and therefore offensive. Their arguments always ended in mutual insults and were followed by several days of silence on both sides. They spent their last two years at The Chase in this state of mutual hostility. Shama became pregnant for the third time. Another addition to the monkey-house, Mr. Biswas said to her. She insulted him by saying that he had nothing to do with her pregnancy. This remark by her led to another serious quarrel. This time Mr. Biswas became so angry that he hit her. Shama dressed up Anand and went away to Hanuman House.

The Birth of Another Child; and the Reconciliation

Mr. Biswas decided that this time Shama would have to make the first move towards a reconciliation. So, for many months he did not go to Hanuman House, not even to see Savi. When, however, the new baby was born, he broke his resolve and, closing the shop, cycled to Arwacas. No one seemed surprised to see him at Hanuman House. He looked for Savi and had some difficulty in finding her. She saw him and smiled, but did not leave the table where she was sitting with the others for dinner. He went up to her, and she said that her mother had told her that he had beaten her. Mr.

Biswas laughed and said that her mother must have been joking. Savi then told him that her mother was upstairs, massaging Myna. This meant that the new baby was a girl and that this time also the name had already been chosen for her without any consultation with him. He went upstairs and met Shama. She asked if he had eaten anything. He shook his head. Myna by now had fallen asleep. Shama laid her on the bed next to Anand. She and Mr. Biswas then went downstairs. She told Mr. Biswas that Mai was sick. This information explained to Mr. Biswas the reason for the children's late dinner and for the absence of so many of Shama's sisters from the hall. Shama then laid out food for him. Everything was cold, but Mr. Biswas did not complain. Shama asked if he would be going back that very night. As Mr. Biswas gave no reply to this question, Shama took it for granted that he would stay at Hanuman House. She made a bed for him in the verandah upstairs among the children.

Savi, Beaten For Her Inability to Tie Her Shoe-Laces

When Mr. Biswas went down the next morning, he found the various sisters getting their children ready for school. This was the only time of the day when it was possible for any one to tell which child belonged to which mother. Mr. Biswas was surprised to see Shama getting Savi ready for school. She gave Savi a satchel containing the usual things, and she gave the child an orange wrapped in tissue paper. The orange was meant for the teacher, she told Savi. Mr. Biswas was not aware that Savi had begun going to school. Shama asked Savi if she would be able to tie her shoe-laces herself in case they became loose as they had done on the previous day. Savi said she could not tie them. Shama then demonstrated to her how the shoe-laces were to be tied. Savi said that she still could not tie them by herself. Shama said she should feel ashamed of herself for not being able to tie her shoe-laces though she was already getting to be six years old. Shama said that the boy Jai could tie his own shoe-laces even though he was a full year younger than Savi. As Savi still pleaded her inability to tie the shoe-laces, Shama gave her a beating with a stick. One of Shama's sisters came to Savi's rescue by tying Savi's laces and sending her off to school.

Mr. Biswas, With the Ailing Mrs Talsi

Mr. Biswas took his breakfast, and Shama then suggested that he should go and inquire about Mai's health. They both went to the Rose Room where Mrs. Talsi lay in bed, with a bandage around her forehead. Mr. Biswas asked Mai how she was feeling. She replied that she was an old woman and that it did not matter how she was feeling. She then asked him how he was getting on. She picked up her bottle of smelling salts and sniffed at it. She then said that her family was unlucky in that everybody was having daughters. She told Mr. Biswas that, when her husband had died, she had still fourteen daughters to marry off. And no mother could

be sure what kind of a married life any of her daughters would have to lead. It all depended upon Fate what kind of a married life a girl led. There were idle husbands, and then there were wife-beaters. Mr. Biswas here looked at Shama, because it at once flashed upon his mind that he had given a blow to her and that she had told her mother about it. Mrs. Tulsi said that a mother had to put up with everything that a daughter had to go through. She said that one should not expect anything from anybody. She knew that everybody was ungrateful, even those to whom she did any favour, she said.

Seth's Suggestions to Mr. Biswas

Seth now came in. He ignored Mr. Biswas and Shama, and asked Mrs. Tulsi how she was. Shama began to sob as if she was a great sufferer in life. After a while Seth turned to Mr. Biswas and asked what the latter proposed to do about the shop. Mr. Biswas replied that the situation of the shop was not such as to hold out any bright prospect for him. He also said that a lot of customers owed him money but that they were not paying him. Seth said that, after what had happened to Mr. Biswas as a consequence of his legal notice to Mungroo, nobody would come forward to pay his debts to Mr. Biswas. Seth implied that Mr. Biswas should have known that men like Seebaran and Mahmoud could not be relied upon, and that their only aim had always been to extract money from their clients. Seth then suggested that Mr. Biswas should get the shop insured and should afterwards burn it in order to claim the insurance money. Seth said that, in this way, Mr. Biswas would be able to get about a hundred dollars. Seth then said that he needed a supervisor at Green Vale. Shama got up and, rushing toward Mr. Biswas, said that he should accept the offer without any hesitation. She then turned to Seth and said that her husband would take up the job. Mr. Biswas said that he did not know anything about estate work. Seth said that he was not begging Mr. Biswas to take up the job. Mrs. Tulsi said that Mr. Biswas should not mind taking up the job. She then told Mr. Biswas that Owad always kept blaming her for the way she had married off her daughters. Seth, turning again to Mr. Biswas, said that perhaps Mr. Biswas had forgotten who Owad was. He then said in a laughing manner that Owad was the old hen's son. Then Seth once again said that the best course for Mr. Biswas would be to get the shop insured and then burn it.

One More Suggestion By Seth

Finally, Seth suggested that Mr. Biswas should go to the police station and tell the police that he apprehended a danger to his life from Mungroo because Mungroo had threatened to kill him in retaliation for the legal notice which Mr. Biswas had sent to Mungroo through his lawyer. This procedure, said Mr. Seth, was necessary as a preliminary to his subsequently setting fire to his shop.

The blame for burning the shop would then naturally rest upon Mungroo. In this way a plausible reason for the shop having been set on fire could be offered to the insurance company. It seemed to Mr. Biswas that Seth himself must also have played such tricks upon the insurance companies.

PART ONE, CHAPTER FIVE

GREEN VALE

Mr. Biswas, An Overseer At Green Vale

Mr. Biswas now found himself at Green Vale. It was a place where trees grew in profusion. The trees darkened the road and surrounded the barracks where Mr. Biswas was given residential accommodation. Every long room in the barracks had been divided into twelve portions, each portion sheltering one family. The long rooms were built of wood and stood on low concrete pillars. Besides the long rooms, there were a number of middle rooms, and then a few rooms at the end. Mr. Biswas, who had been appointed a driver* or a supervisor was given an end room. Into this room Mr. Biswas and Shama moved all their furniture. It was during the move to Green Vale that Mr. Biswas discovered that the drawers of Shama's dressing-table contained Shama's marriage certificate, the birth certificates of her children, a Bible which she had got from the missionary school which she had attended, and a packet of letters from a pen-pal in a foreign land. Mr. Biswas had never imagined that Shama, of all persons, had been in contact with the outside world by her correspondence with a pen-pal in her student-days.

His Duties and His Difficulties At Green Vale

So Mr. Biswas became an overseer at a salary of twenty-five dollars a month, which was twice as much as the labourers got. As he had told Seth, he really knew nothing about estate work. So he got his instructions from Seth who came to Green Vale every Saturday to inspect the work done and to pay the labourers their wages. Mr. Biswas would on such occasions sit beside Seth to read out the work each labourer had done. On such occasions Mr. Biswas had a feeling of power and authority. But on the other days it was different. Knowing that he was not trained in the job which he had to perform, the labourers did not take him too seriously. The labourers thought that they could fool him, and they actually tried to do so. Mr. Biswas could see what the labourers thought about him, but he felt ashamed to complain to Seth against them. He vented his dissatisfaction upon Shama. He told her that she and her family had got him into this difficult job. He would come back from the fields sweating, bitten by flies and other insects. The barrack-yard, with its mud and animal droppings, gave him a feeling of nausea,

* The word 'driver' has here been used to mean a supervisor, or overseer.

especially when he was eating fish. He bathed again and again in order to soothe the itching on his skin and he sang Hindi songs while bathing. He would repeatedly tell Shama that she and her family had got him into this.

Seventy-five Dollars, Obtained From the Insurance Company

One Saturday, after paying the labourers, Seth smiled and told Mr. Biswas that the shop at The Chase had been burnt and that money had been obtained from the insurance company. Seth then took out a packet of dollar-notes from his pocket and counted seventy-five which he then handed over to Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas felt impressed and grateful. He decided to put this money aside and add to it until he had enough to build a house of his own. Mr. Biswas had been thinking deeply about this house, and by now he knew exactly what he wanted. He did not want a mud-house. He wanted wooden walls for his house, a wooden ceiling, and a galvanized iron roof. He did not talk about his plan for the house to Shama who lived most of the time at Hanuman House. Green Vale was situated just outside Arwacas, and Shama therefore did not face any difficulty in going to Hanuman House to stay there for long periods. Rejecting the cold food which Shama sometimes sent to him from Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas learned to cook for himself and he bought a stove for the purpose.

Another Christmas. The Self-Important Tulsi Sons

Christmas came, and the Tulsi Store was decorated with paper holly and berries. But the Tulsi Store carried no new Christmas signs. Mr. Biswas's old signs still served the purpose, Savi knew about these signs having been painted by her father, and she felt proud of him. But the gaiety of the signs puzzled her because she could not imagine her morose father painting signs of this kind. In any case, there was noise and bustle at the Tulsi Store and at all the other stores as well. Mrs. Tulsi herself came into the Store and spoke to the customers with whom she was acquainted. The two gods walked about sternly, superintending the sales, signing cash memos, and counting money. The elder god, Shekhar, was especially stern at this Christmas. He had not yet left the Roman Catholic College, but efforts were being made by his mother and his uncle to find him a wife from among the handful of families of status. He was, however, in no mood to accept his family's proposals in this respect and threatened to commit suicide if they persisted.

Christmas Presents For the Children At Hanuman House

On Christmas Eve most of the sons-in-law left Hanuman House in order to go to their own parents and other relatives, leaving their wives and children behind. Mr. Biswas returned to Green Vale from a visit to Hanuman House. On the way he remembered that he had

not purchased any presents for Savi and Anand, but he knew that they expected no presents from him because they would receive their presents from Mrs. Tulsi at Hanuman House on Christmas morning. When Anand got up on Christmas morning, he found in his pillow-case a balloon, a red apple in a dark blue wrapper, and a tin whistle. Savi found in her stockings a balloon, an apple, and a small rubber doll. All the children compared their presents, and found that there was no cause for any one to feel jealous. After breakfast which consisted of tea and biscuits, the children waited for lunch and, after lunch, they waited for afternoon-tea. The afternoon-tea was quite satisfactory, but dinner at night was as bad as on ordinary days.

A Doll's House For Savi

In the barracks at Green Vale there were no apples, no stockings, no cakes, and no refinements of any kind. It was from the start a day of no eating and no drinking. At Green Vale the day ended with the labourers beating their wives. Mr. Biswas had left the barracks and gone to see his mother. He ate his dinner at Tara's house. On the next day, he visited his brothers who were now both married men. On the day following, he cycled to Arwacas in order to visit Hanuman House. On the way he got off his bicycle, went into a shop, and bought a huge doll's house for Savi. However, he bought nothing for Anand. When he arrived at Hanuman House, the women and the children crowded around him. Mr. Biswas gave the doll's house to Savi, whereupon Mrs. Tulsi asked him what he had bought for the other children. Mr. Biswas replied that it had not been possible for him to carry anything else after having bought the heavy doll's house. Mrs. Tulsi said that, although she was a poor woman, she gave something to everybody when she gave anything to one. Shama now looked at Mr. Biswas accusingly whereupon Mr. Biswas said that it would be better for him to go back to the barracks. He directed Savi to allow Anand also to play with the doll's house.

The Doll's House, Wrecked By Shama

Mr. Biswas could not help feeling at this time that, compared with Savi, the boy was a disappointment. Anand was small for his years; he looked thin and sickly; he had a big head; and he was shy and tongue-tied with Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas told the boy that next time he too would get a present. Anand said that he wanted a toy car, a big one. Mr. Biswas promised to buy him a car, and he kept his promise. Next time when Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House, he gave a toy car to Anand. But at this time Savi came to him and burst into loud sobs. She told Mr. Biswas that her doll's house had been shattered by her mother. She took Mr. Biswas into the yard and showed him the wreckage of the doll's house. Mr. Biswas was stunned at the sight. He then became furious and shouted to Shama that she was a bitch. Shama said that she did not mind what he called her. He asked her if she had broken the doll's house, and she casually replied that she had certainly done so. He asked

whom she had wanted to please by this action. Shama replied that she had not tried to please anybody except herself.

Savi, Taken Away By Mr. Biswas

As a protest against Shama's action in having broken the doll's house, Mr. Biswas decided to take Savi away from Hanuman House. He asked Shama to pack up Savi's clothes. Shama complied, saying that Savi was his daughter and that it was for him to decide what was good for Savi's future. Mr. Biswas tied the suitcase containing Savi's clothes to the carrier of his bicycle, and he then made Savi sit on the cross-bar of the bicycle. The bicycle had no lights, and as the evening had already become dark, he was stopped on the way by a policeman. The policeman found that Mr. Biswas did not even have a licence for his bicycle. He thereupon took down Mr. Biswas's name and address and said that he would be receiving a summons to attend the court.

A Miserable Week At Green Vale

Mr. Biswas spent a miserable week in the barracks at Green Vale. He would leave the barracks early in the morning and return in the afternoon. All that time Savi was left alone. In the evenings and at night he would read out from some novel to amuse her; he would explain to her the views of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; he would make her learn the quotations hanging on the walls; and he would sometimes make her sit still while he drew a figure of her on a sheet of paper. Sometimes Savi heard him muttering to himself that he had been trapped by the Tulsi family and that he now found himself in a hole. Savi's school was to reopen on Monday. He therefore decided to let go her back with Seth when Seth came on his usual Saturday visit.

Shama and the Other Children Also At Green Vale

On Saturday Seth came. But he did not come alone. Shama, Anand, and Myna also came with him. The labourers had already queued up at the fixed place to receive their wages. They were paid, and thereafter Seth said that he wanted to have a look at the fields. Seth went away, leaving Mr. Biswas behind. Shama asked him if he would like to have a cup of tea, but he made no reply. Shama sent him a cup of tea through Anand and he was half inclined to throw it at Shama's face. However, he accepted the cup and began to sip the tea. On returning from the fields, Seth smiled at every one benevolently. Shama gave him a large cup of tea, and he drank it in large draughts. He then asked Mr. Biswas if he had received a summons from the court. Mr. Biswas recalled his having been warned by a policeman that he would get the summons. However, Seth informed him that he had already settled the case with the police. Seth then left.

Shama's Explanation For Having Broken the Doll's House

Mr. Biswas now asked Shama why she had not stayed on at the monkey-house (that is, Hanuman House). She gave him no reply but began to shed tears. She then explained that, after he had given a doll's house as a present to Savi, everybody in the house had been criticizing him, and her too. She said that she had broken the doll's house in sheer desperation in order to satisfy all of them. His gift of a doll's house to Savi had made everybody jealous. Mr. Biswas asked if, under similar circumstances, Chinta would have broken a doll's house given to her by her husband Govind. What he meant was that no other woman in Hanuman House would have behaved as Shama had done. Next day, being Sunday, Shama got ready to go back to Hanuman House because Savi's school was to reopen on Monday. During the rest of the school-term, Shama sometimes stayed at Green Vale with her husband, and sometimes at Hanuman House.

Mr. Biswas's Fears About the Future

At Easter, Mr. Biswas learnt that Shama had become pregnant for the fourth time. He had certainly won Savi's affections; but Anand was still hostile to him. Myna's attitude was still uncertain. And now another child was coming. He began to fear the future. He felt that he was falling into the void, and he was haunted by a strange terror at night. He was now always tired and always restless. So, he started going to Hanuman House more often. When alone in his room at the barracks, he sometimes talked to himself, and sometimes shouted. On the newspaper sheet nailed to a wall he read the words : "Amazing scenes were witnessed yesterday when. . . ." These words now began to occur to him again and again.

Some Land, Taken Away From the Labourers

One Saturday Seth announced that some twenty acres of land, which had for many years been rented to the labourers, would be taken away from them. Seth, accompanied by Mr. Biswas, went from hut to hut, informing the labourers concerned about this decision. Afterwards Seth asked Mr. Biswas to remain vigilant because the labourers, who would certainly resent this decision, might try to do some harm to him. After the sugarcane crop had been reaped from the land, the labourers tried to damage the soil by digging up the roots. Seth said that he would have to whip one or two of the culprits in order to prevent the others from doing more damage. In the end it was decided to employ a watchman to protect the soil. In due course the land was prepared, without further trouble from the labourers, for the new crop.

Mr. Biswas, Haunted by Terrors At Night

Every night Mr. Biswas bolted himself in his room at Green Vale. But the fears which had begun to afflict him did not cease. He

had to make movements in the room in order to destroy the stillness which had its own terror for him. Various shapes appeared before his eyes. On the wall, for instance, he saw a nail which he thought might puncture his eyes. Every leg of the table in the room seemed to have the power to press against his body and crush him. He lay face downwards on the bed, not wanting to see but to drive out the shapes of objects from his head. It was only in the mornings that he felt somewhat better and forgot his fears.

Shekhar, Married to a Rich Christian Girl

Many changes now took place at Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi had been looking for a suitable bride for her elder son Shekhar. It was felt that any educated, beautiful, and rich Indian girl would do. Eventually, a girl belonging to a Presbyterian family, which had plenty of property, was selected. The marriage took place in a registry office; and the elder god (namely Shekhar), instead of bringing his bride home in accordance with Hindu customs and the traditions of his family, left Hanuman House for good. He began a new life as a supervisor of the property belonging to his wife's family. Soon afterwards, Mrs. Tulsi went to live in Port of Spain because she felt that she must personally look after the younger god (namely, Owad) who was still studying. However, she kept coming to Hanuman House on Friday afternoons and staying till Sunday evening. When the younger god's school closed for the holidays, Hanuman House was scrubbed and cleaned to receive him and Mrs. Tulsi. The sons-in-law got ready to make offerings to the younger god. Mr. Biswas, however, brought nothing and, when Shama grumbled at this omission, Mr. Biswas said that he did not think it necessary to bring anything for the younger god when nobody in the whole crowd at Hanuman House had ever shown any consideration for his son Anand.

Anand, Taunted By Chinta

Anand had begun to go to the mission school. He hated going to school. Savi told Mr. Biswas that Anand was a coward because he was frightened of going to school. Aunt Chinta said to Anand that, if he did not go to school regularly, he would become a grass-cutter like his father. On being told what Chinta had said, Mr. Biswas retaliated by asking Savi to inquire from Chinta if Chinta had ever read Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus about whom Savi had been told a good deal by Mr. Biswas during the one week which she had spent at the barracks with him. Mr. Biswas also said that, in case Chinta again referred to him as a grass-cutter, Savi should tell her that it was better to be a grass-cutter than a crab-catcher. What he implied was that Chinta's husband and the other men at Hanuman House were no better than crab-catchers.

Verbal Skirmishes Between Mr. Biswas and Chinta

When Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House the next time, he found that Savi had conveyed his messages to Chinta. Chinta came straight to him and said that she wanted him to know that, until he came to Hanuman House, there had been no crab-catchers there. What she meant was that he was the only crab-catcher at Hanuman House, if there was any. She then scoffed at his teaching Savi the thoughts and ideas of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. Mr. Biswas thereupon made Chinta conscious of the great progress that Savi had made in her studies, and he further told Chinta that, so far as he himself was concerned, he had been promoted from the nursery class to the second standard directly, without having to spend a year in the first standard when as a child he was going to school. What he meant was that he had been a precocious child. Chinta made an appropriate retaliatory reply. When Mr. Biswas made an offensive remark to Chinta, Chinta felt deeply distressed and told Shama to instruct her husband to stop provoking her. Chinta threatened to tell her husband Govind about Mr. Biswas's insolence. This threat was intended to remind Mr. Biswas of the beating he had once received from Govind.

A Bitter Pill For Anand

The next time when Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House, he learnt about the punishment to which Anand had been subjected because of his misdemeanour at school. Savi told Mr. Biswas that Anand had been given a beating by Shama and had then been ordered to remain in a kneeling posture on the floor. Mr. Biswas tried to console Anand and warned Shama against treating the boy in that manner. Mr. Biswas told Anand about his own misadventure at Pundit Jairam's house when he had relieved himself on a handkerchief. Anand now stopped crying but said that he did not want to go back to the school where everybody had ridiculed him for his failure to have gone to the school latrine in time and having spoiled his clothes as a consequence of that. Mr. Biswas then said that Anand could go with him to the barracks if he so wished. But Shama said that Anand must stay on and continue going to school. Chinta thereupon said that there was no harm if Mr. Biswas took away the boy because Mr. Biswas could at least teach the boy A, B, C, if nothing beyond that. In the end Mr. Biswas had to leave Anand at Hanuman House in accordance with Shama's wish.

Mr. Biswas's Decision to Build a House of His Own

Mr. Biswas now felt that he should not postpone building a house of his own. He felt that, unless he started building the house now, he would never build it. His children were staying at Hanuman House; he was living in the barrack-room; and the result of all this would be that he would descend into the void. He wanted to ward off that danger. Accordingly, on the following Saturday, when Seth came to Green Vale, Mr. Biswas asked if Seth could allow him

to use a small plot of land on the estate to build a house of his own. Mr. Biswas said that he was willing to pay a certain amount of money as lease for the land. Seth replied that Mr. Biswas need not talk about the lease and that he could just choose any site he liked and build a house. On Sunday morning, Mr. Biswas went to see a builder-cum-carpenter in a small Negro settlement, not far from Arwacas. The name of this artisan, who did many other things besides construction-work and carpentering, was Mr. Maclean. Mr. Biswas contacted the man and told him about his plan to build a house. He told the carpenter that he wanted two bedroom, a drawing-room, and a gallery. Mr. Maclean thereupon himself supplied other details about the house and said that it would cost Mr. Biswas about three hundred dollars. Mr. Maclean then asked if Mr. Biswas had chosen a site and, on learning that Mr. Biswas had already done so, Mr. Maclean said he would inspect the site as soon as he could. It was agreed that Mr. Biswas would give Mr. Maclean a hundred dollars to begin with, and fifty dollars more at the end of the month. Mr. Biswas said that, as he could not pay the whole amount straightaway, Mr. Maclean would have to build the house gradually, little by little.

Mr. Biswas's Visit to Tara to Borrow Some Money

To meet the cost of the proposed house, Mr. Biswas decided to borrow some money from Tara and Ajodha. He did not want to go to Seth or Mrs. Tulsi for the money, and he could not ask Misir either because his relationship with that man had cooled since his borrowing money from him to pay Mungroo and his lawyer Seebaran. He went to Tara's house on the following Sunday, when Ajodha was bound to be at home. Tara greeted Mr. Biswas warmly and then told him that she was keeping indifferent health, whereupon he had to give her sympathy instead of directly making a request for money. Tara then asked him about his children, and was told that one more was coming. She asked about the Tulsis, and he replied as briefly as possible, knowing that there was an antagonism between Tara's family and the Tulsi family. The Tulsis, who did *Puja* everyday and celebrated every Hindu festival, regarded Ajodha as a materialistic man pursuing only wealth and comfort. Ajodha and Tara on their side thought that the Tulsis were a squalid family

Unable to Ask For a Loan

Mr. Biswas was now feeling reluctant to tell Tara what he had come for. And then it was too late for him to speak of his purpose in coming. Rabidat, the younger son of Bhandat, came in; and Mr. Biswas had to keep silent. As far as Tara and Anjodha were concerned, Rabidat was still a bachelor, though it was generally known that, like his brother Jagdat, he was living with a woman of another race and had several children by her, too. Ajodha now appeared on the scene, and he asked Mr. Biswas how he was getting

on with his job. Mr. Biswas said that he really wanted to talk to Ajodha about his job which, he said, was a steady one. Mr. Biswas would now have mentioned his plan about the house and his need for a loan of money, and he did go on to say that he had begun to build a little house. But then the conversation took a different turn, and Mr. Biswas did not get any opportunity to make his request for a loan. Ajodha suggested that Mr. Biswas should take Sanatogen which was a very good tonic and which would give him the necessary energy for doing his job well and for building his house. Ajodha also said that Mr. Biswas must have saved a good deal of money since he had started building a house. Now Jagdat, Rabidat's brother, also came in. Jagdat was the kind of man the expression on whose face always seemed to indicate that he had come from a funeral. Tara, turning to Jagdat, said that Mr. Biswas was building a house. Jagdat asked if Mr. Biswas had come to invite all of them to the house-warming ceremony and remarked that Mr. Biswas must be making a lot of money. Food was then served, and Mr. Biswas joined the family in eating though he ate without any pleasure. When he was about to leave, Tara gave him some fruit for his children. He did not want to explain to her that the children were living not with him but at Hanuman House. He had not been able to ask for a loan. Before he returned to Green Vale, he had some light-hearted conversation privately with Jagdat in the course of which Jagdat spoke about the miserliness of Ajodha who, he said, would never give any money to anybody but who was very liberal in suggesting vitamins and tonics for everybody.

Mr. Maclean to Begin Constructing the House

Early next morning Mr. Maclean turned up at the barracks and said that he was ready to start work on Mr. Biswas's house. The required materials for the house were ordered the same afternoon. Mr. Maclean had brought his tool-box with him and he had brought a workman with him too. The workman was a Negro labourer called Edgar. When Mr. Maclean was about to start work, he said that he and his assistant wanted something to "wet" the job. What he meant was that Mr. Biswas should give them some liquor. Mr. Biswas gave some money to Mr. Maclean to buy rum. Mr. Maclean sent Edgar to bring some rum. Edgar soon returned with a bottle. Mr. Maclean opened the bottle and drank to Mr. Biswas's health and to the house which was to be built. Then Edgar drank a similar toast.

Shama's Objections to the Building of a House

One thing puzzled Mr. Biswas. The materials for the house had cost nearly eighty-five dollars. That left fifteen dollars to be divided between Mr. Maclean and Edgar for work which would take them from eight to ten weeks. Fifteen dollars seemed to be too little for their labour. Yet they were both cheerful. That afternoon when Mr. Maclean and Edgar had left, Shama came. She had heard from Seth

about the proposed house, and she now expressed her surprise to Mr. Biswas. She said that, if he exhausted all the money which he had, she and the children would be faced with an acute shortage of money. Mr. Biswas replied that his family had no reason to feel ashamed if he was building a house. Shama said that he should not compete with people who had a lot more money than he had. Mr. Biswas said that he did not want her and the children to spend all the days of their lives at Hanuman House which he compared to a big coal barrel. Shama's pregnancy was now beginning to be prominent. She asked where he would get the money from to finish the house. She also complained that he had not got a pundit to perform the needful ritual before beginning the construction of the house.

A Ceremony, Performed By Hari at the Site of the House

To satisfy Shama on the last point she had raised, Mr. Biswas allowed her to invite Hari to perform the necessary ceremony, at the same time reminding her that the last time Hari had come and performed the house-blessing ceremony at The Chase, they had been overtaken by disaster. Hari came. He showed neither any interest in Mr. Biswas nor any antagonism towards him. He was just "constipatedly apathetic". He had brought his equipment with him, and now he started the ceremony. He dropped a penny and certain other things wrapped in a mango leaf into a hole on the site of the house, and sprinkled water on it. Throughout the ceremony Mr. Maclean stood reverentially, with his hat off his head. At the end, Hari changed back into his normal clothes. Mr. Maclean looked surprised. He asked if the ceremony had ended without any feast or distribution of food and clothing which were generally a part of Indian ceremonies. Mr. Biswas replied that a feast would be held only when the construction of the house was completed. By the end of that week the house had begun to take shape. The floor-frame had been placed in position, and the frames for the walls too; and the roof was outlined. On the following Monday the back staircase went up. Then Mr. Maclean said that he and Edgar would come back to work on receiving information that Mr. Biswas had got some more materials.

Building Operations

At the end of that month, Mr. Biswas set aside fifteen of his monthly pay of twenty-five dollars for the house, and was thus left with only ten dollars for his routine household expenses. At the end of the second month he could add only eight dollars to the house-fund. Then Seth came with an offer. He said that Mrs. Tulsi's old brick-factory had been pulled down and that some of the material from the dismantled factory could be offered to Mr. Biswas for five dollars. Eventually, Mr. Biswas bought the material for three dollars. Anand expressed his disapproval of this transaction, whereupon Seth said that Anand was proving himself to be another

"paddler". Mr. Biswas too was not very happy with the second-hand material, but in view of the shortage of money he did not now care what the house would look like in the long run. Mr. Maclean proved quite helpful. He suggested that they should use some cedar planks instead of pitchpine for the floor. A man had offered to sell a whole pile of cedar planks for seven dollars, said Mr. Maclean. Mr. Biswas hesitated. Of all kinds of wood, cedar appealed to him in the least. But realizing the need for economy, he accepted Mr. Maclean's suggestion. Then there was the problem of buying rafters. Mr. Maclean said that the rafters would not be visible from the outside of the house, and that they were visible only from the inside. Mr. Maclean therefore proposed that they should obtain only tree-branches which, after the necessary trimming, would serve as rafters. Mr. Biswas had to be content with the substitute proposed by Mr. Maclean. As another step in the process of economizing the expenditure, Mr. Maclean now worked alone. Edgar was never seen again at the place of work. This was not the end of the economizing process. Mr. Maclean suggested that they could use pitch instead of mastic* cement. They got the pitch free, from a neglected part of the road where asphalt had been laid on in lavish lumps. Mr. Maclean put small stones over the holes in the roof and sealed them with pitch. It was a slow, long job, but it worked, even though the sight offended an onlooker's aesthetic sense. The cedar floor-boards came and Mr. Maclean fitted them together as neatly as he could. For his fortnight's work, Mr. Maclean asked for only eight dollars. As the work had at this stage to be suspended because Mr. Biswas did not have any more money, the house now became a playground for the children of the barracks. They climbed and they jumped, and they did much other mischief with their pranks. Mr. Biswas did his utmost to keep them away, threatening to thrash them if they came inside.

A Dog Called Tarzan

As the sugarcane crop grew taller, the dispossessed labourers became more and more discontented, and Mr. Biswas began to receive threats. Seth asked Mr. Biswas not to become panicky. But Mr. Biswas did feel perturbed. He knew of the many killings which had taken place in districts inhabited by the Indian labourers, and he knew also that the killings had been so well planned that investigations had led to no arrests. So he decided to take precautions for his personal safety. He slept with a cutlass and a stick by his side. And he obtained a puppy which he thought would stand guard during the nights. He gave the name of Tarzan to the puppy to prepare it for its duties. But Tarzan turned out to be a friendly kind of animal and a terror only to the hens and chickens of the neighbourhood. The poultry-owners began to complain that their hens had stopped laying eggs because of a fear of Mr. Biswas's puppy. Tarzan was often found with bits of hens' feathers stuck in

*Mastic—a kind of cement.

the corners of its mouth, indicating that it had attacked some hen or chicken. Then one day Tarzan ate an egg and immediately developed a taste for eggs. As a result it stole the eggs even from the secret places where the hens laid them.

Mr. Biswas's Feeling of Insecurity

To while away his time in the evenings and at night, Mr. Biswas bought a number of cheap novels from the bookstall at Arwacas. Late one night, when he had extinguished the oil-lamp and was in bed, he heard footsteps outside his room. Tarzan had been put on duty outside at the door. Mr. Biswas jumped out of his bed and, picking up his stick, opened the door to see who was there. Two rooms away a light was burning ; someone was out, or perhaps a child was ill. Mr. Biswas found no intruder anywhere. But after that, he always slept with his oil-lamp burning. He now began to fear that his house might be set on fire, with the result that every night he went to bed with an additional anxiety. When Shama came from Hanuman House for a few days, he told her of his fears. She said that he need not worry because there seemed to be no danger. When Seth came, he too regarded Mr. Biswas's fear as baseless. In the meantime Mr. Maclean had come twice and gone away because Mr. Biswas still had no money for the materials.

A Fear of Something Unknown Despite a Sensible Decision

Then one evening a great peace descended upon him and he took a decision. He had for too long regarded every situation as a temporary one ; from now on he would look upon every stretch of time, however short, as precious. He would never dismiss time again. No action would merely lead to another. He would regard every action as a part of his life because no action could be recalled. He must pay due heed to every action. And so great was his self-confidence now that he did something which he had not done for weeks. He took down Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* from the shelf and began to read it. But, in the course of his reading he suddenly began to feel afraid of some unknown thing. He asked himself what was frightening him. He felt that he was afraid of people, imaginary people and real people. But he could not explain to himself why he was afraid of people when he had spent all his life among people. He had gone to school ; he had walked along the crowded roads on market days ; he had faced people across the counter of his rum-shop. Perhaps he was feeling worried about his house, and perhaps he was feeling frightened of the threats which the labourers had conveyed to him.

An Irrational Fear, and a Sense of Futility

Fear had now become an inseparable part of his existence. The day surely began as a normal, happy day. But at night he felt afraid. He questioned himself again and again as to the reason for

his feeling afraid, but he could not think of any rational explanation. He would lie down on the bed and cry for all his lost happiness. It occurred to him that by repeating as far as he could all his actions of the previous night he might somehow get rid of his fear. So, with a planned deliberation, he bathed, cooked, ate, and then sat down to read Hugo's novel. But the reading only brought back the memory of the previous night, and it brought back the fear. In the morning all the fear left him, but the period of fearlessness diminished with every passing day, and a day came when his moods of lucidity became very short. He now began to feel that all action was irrelevant and futile. He felt that he could not remain confined to his room with the old newspapers and with his imaginings.

One of the Two Bedrooms, Walled With Timber

One day Mr. Maclean came again. Somebody had offered to him some timber at a bargain price. Mr. Maclean said that the timber would be enough for the walls of one room. Mr. Biswas then went with Mr. Maclean to look at the incomplete house. There were cracks in the floor-boards; and asphalt had begun to slip out of the roof. But the materials used having been of an inferior kind, Mr. Biswas had to accept the inevitable. The timber suggested by Mr. Maclean was then purchased. It was cedar. The back bedroom was walled with this timber.

A Certain Person's Land Set on Fire

Mr. Biswas's sleep was now broken by bad dreams of all kinds. Some nights later he was awakened by a barking and by shouts. The watchman told him that somebody had set fire to Dookinan's land. Mr. Biswas put on his clothes hurriedly, and followed the excited labourers who had come in a crowd. The labourers began to beat the roots and the other growth on Dookinan's plot of land with their sticks in order to extinguish the fire. The flames subsided, and the trash was seen to be merely smouldering now. During the short time when the labourers were busy extinguishing the fire, Mr. Biswas had experienced neither any fear nor any questionings. But soon afterwards, the questionings returned, and the fear too. When the labourers had gone back to their barracks, he was left alone. But this one hour or so had proved one thing: that he was going to get better soon.

Morbid Thoughts and Visions

At the beginning of the Christmas school holidays, when the sugarcane was about to ripen and the Christmas shops-signs were going up at Arwacas, Shama sent Mr. Biswas a message through Seth that she would be bringing the children to Green Vale for a few days. Mr. Biswas was still having his morbid thoughts, questionings, and fears. He even imagined himself killing Anand and Savi. He began to see visions in which he attacked Anand and

Savi with a cutlass, or poisoned them, or strangled them. About Myna and Shama he did not care ; he did not want to kill those two.

His Strange Reactions to His Wife and Children

Shama and the children arrived. His intention to kill Anand and Savi now seemed to him to be absolutely preposterous. He felt resigned to his fate, and he felt very fatigued. But even when he allowed himself to be touched and kissed by Anand and Savi, he was questioning himself about them. Of Shama he was not afraid ; only envious, because of her thoughtless self-assurance. Then almost immediately he began to hate her. Her pregnancy was grotesque ; he hated the way she sat down ; he hated the way she made fuss over the children ; he hated the noises she made while eating.

Mr. Biswas's Violence Towards Shama

Even after a week Mr. Biswas's fatigue had not left him. In fact, he had begun to feel sick, so that the longer he stayed in the room the less he wanted to leave it. He became constipated. Yet from time to time he had to go outside ; then he came back hurriedly and anxiously. Shama asked him if there was something weighing upon his mind. But he became violently angry with her ; never before had he felt so disgusted with her. He said that she wanted to see him dead. In fact, he said, he was dying. He said that he would just remain in this room and die. Then he began to scream and cry. He told Shama not to touch him and not to come near him. But she did touch him, whereupon he kicked at her and she uttered a cry of pain. He realized too late that he had kicked her on the belly. One of the women from the neighbourhood came just then, and seeing Shama's plight suggested that Shama should pack up her clothes and go back to Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas shouted to Shama to go away and take her children with her. Then suddenly he said that she and the other children could go but that Anand would not go with her. Shama packed up her clothes and ordered Savi to get ready. Mr. Biswas once again said that Anand would not go back to Hanuman House with Shama. Anand thereupon said that he would stay with papa. Shama took Myna in her arms ; Savi picked up the suitcase ; and they walked out of the house. Anand remained behind. Mr. Biswas then tried to please Anand because the boy had stood by him. However, the boy was in no mood to accept his father's attentions. Mr. Biswas thereupon asked him why he had stayed behind. Anand replied that he had stayed because he did not want his father to be left alone in the house. For the rest of the day they hardly spoke to each other.

Mr. Biswas's Interest in His Son Anand

Mr. Biswas's instinct had been right. As soon as Shama had gone, his fatigue left him. He became restless again, and almost

welcomed the familiar turmoil in his mind. He went to the fields, taking Anand with him on the first day. Anand, dusty, itching, and scorched by the sun, refused to go again, and thereafter remained at the barracks with Tarzan. Mr. Biswas made some toys for Anand. At night Mr. Biswas sketched imaginary scenes, such as snow-covered mountains and fir trees, to amuse Anand. They also talked to each other. One night Mr. Biswas asked the boy who his father was. And, when the boy replied that he (Mr. Biswas) was his father, Mr. Biswas said that the boy's answer was wrong. He told the boy that God was his father. Asked by Anand who he (Mr. Biswas) was then, Mr. Biswas replied that he was just "somebody", that he was "nobody" at all, that he was just a man whom Anand knew. On another night Mr. Biswas taught Anand how to mix colours. He showed the boy that red and yellow, when mixed together, made orange ; and that blue and yellow, when mixed, became green. Then Mr. Biswas taught the boy that things, when released in the air, dropped to the ground because of the force of earth's gravity. He expressed his regret that Anand had not been taught the law of gravity at school. He then proceeded to tell Anand about scientists like Copernicus and Galileo who had made great discoveries and whom the world could not coerce into denying or repudiating their discoveries. On Saturday when Seth came, he suggested that Anand should return to Hanuman House. Seth tempted the boy with cake and ice-cream ; but, when Mr. Biswas reminded Anand about Galileo, Anand decided to stay on in the barracks.

From the Barracks to a Room in the New House

Then Mr. Biswas shifted from the barracks to that room of his house which had been completed. In moving to that room, Mr. Biswas thought that he had performed a positive action or made a defiant gesture. He had a feeling that living in a new house in the new year might bring about a new state of mind. He would not have shifted if he had been alone because he feared solitude more than he feared people. But, with Anand, he had enough company.

The Inconveniences in the New Room

The new house had as yet no kitchen, and even the room which Mr. Biswas and Anand occupied was smaller than the barrack-room. Shama's dressing-table, the green table, and the rocking-chair filled the room ; and there were other inconveniences. And every night in his dreams Mr. Biswas saw snakes. The questionings and the fears also persisted in his mind. He had not been able to leave them behind at the barracks. One night Anand was awakened by Mr. Biswas jumping out of bed, screaming. A small, thin snake had fallen upon Mr. Biswas from the roof. When they both looked up, they saw the parent snake waiting to release some more of its offspring. With poles and brooms they tried to pull down the snakes, but they did not have much success. Next morning Anand had a tooth-ache. Mr. Biswas advised him to say *Rama Rama*

Sita Rama. Anand repeated the words. Mr. Biswas had a feeling that Anand wanted to leave him and go to his mother at Hanuman House.

A Visit By Two Strangers Searching For Employment

One afternoon when Anand was idling away his time in the yard, two men came to the house and asked where the overseer, meaning Mr. Biswas, was. Anand replied that the overseer was in the fields and would be coming soon. When Mr. Biswas returned, he felt somewhat suspicious of the intentions of the two strangers and ordered them to go away. The men replied that they had been asked by Mr. Seth to contact the overseer for employment. But Mr. Biswas did not believe them and sent them away.

Tarzan, Found Dead. Rain, Thunder, Strong Winds

Then the next morning, Anand, on opening the door, found Tarzan lying dead at the doorstep. Anand informed Mr. Biswas who came and found that the dog's neck had been cut and its belly ripped open. After seeing this dreadful sight, Anand said that he did not want to stay here any longer but wanted to go back to Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas agreed to take him back to Hanuman House on the following day, but inwardly he was afraid of being left alone. Anand insisted that he should be taken back to Hanuman House the same day. Mr. Biswas then said that he would take him back in the afternoon the same day. However, in the afternoon the sky became overcast with clouds, and after a few minutes it began to rain. The roof built by Mr. Maclean began to leak here and there. The edges of the floor became wet while the wall-boards got drenched with water. Mr. Biswas began to chant *Rama Rama Sita Rama*. Anand ignored his father's chant. On one wall, in the light of the oil-lamp, Anand saw a column of black ants. They were not the crazy ants, not the frivolous creatures which would get scattered at the slightest disturbance; they were the biting ants which moved slowly and in strict formation, looking as solemn and dignified as grave-diggers. Mr. Biswas was chanting *Rama Rama Sita Rama*, and Anand now repeated the words. Mr. Biswas then began to curse everybody—Ajodha, Pundit Jairam, Mrs. Tulsi, Shama, Seth. The rain stopped but, after a while, it came again. The procession of the ants continued. Anand killed some of them with a stick. Mr. Biswas began to mutter hymns in Hindi and in English; but he left them unfinished and began to curse people again. The roof now shook with the force of a blast of wind which hit it. One of the sheets of corrugated iron was torn off. Then the roar of thunder was heard, and the flashes of lightning were seen. The wind continued to hit the house. Then there was a roar louder than any that had been heard before. When it struck the house, the window flew open and the oil-lamp was extinguished. Anand began to scream. The rain and the wind swept through the room with great force so that the door opening into the drawing-room now burst open. Anand

screamed and screamed. Then Anand saw a light outside. It was a man, bending forward with a hurricane-lamp in one hand and a cutlass in the other. The man was Ramkhilawan from the barracks. He had covered his head and shoulders with an empty jute-bag. He was bare-footed, and his trousers were rolled up above his knees. He had lost his calf and was searching for it. The oil-lamp in Mr. Biswas's room still had some oil in it. Ramkhilawan came and, taking out a box of matches from his pocket, lighted the lamp.

PART ONE : CHAPTER SIX

A DEPARTURE

Mr. Biswas, Very Sick. Taken to Hanuman House

Mr. Biswas's condition now became so wretched that a message had to be sent to Hanuman House for aid. Some of the labourers went and delivered the message. Mrs. Tulsi and her younger son were in Port of Spain. Shama was in the Rose Room for her fourth delivery. The midwife had been attending upon her for two days. Sisters and their husbands held a meeting, and it was decided to bring Mr. Biswas to Hanuman House. Chinta said that she had always thought Mr. Biswas to be a madman and that now his madness must have become worse. The children overheard the talk and they said to Savi that something had happened to her papa. They all stuck pins in the wicks of lamps to keep misfortune and death away from the house. Mr. Biswas was carried from Green Vale to Hanuman House by Govind, while Anand went walking. Mr. Biswas was not wild or violent; and he did not pretend that he was driving a motor-car or picking cocoa, which were the two actions popularly associated with madness. In other words, he gave no signs of being insane. He simply looked deeply annoyed and fatigued. He was put in the Blue Room, given dry clothes, and offered a cup of hot milk with brandy. He seemed to feel better, and he was aware of the fact that he was at Hanuman House, though he could not remember what had happened prior to his coming here. He felt that he was continually awakening to a new situation.

Mr. Biswas Not to Return to Green Vale

It was still raining next morning, though the wind had stopped. The High Street was flooded. (Hanuman House was situated in High Street). The children could not go to school that day. There was much excitement among them not only because of the unusual weather and the unexpected holiday, but also because of the tumult which had taken place in the house the previous night. The children said to Savi that her papa had arrived and that he was now in the Blue Room, but Savi did not want to go either to the Blue Room to meet her father or to the Rose Room to see her mother. Towards the middle of the morning the rain thinned to a

drizzle, and then stopped altogether. The news about Mr. Biswas's arrival and his sickness was conveyed to Shama. She suggested that the furniture from Green Vale should be brought to Hanuman House. Evidently she did not want that Mr. Biswas should go back to that place. The doctor came. He was a Roman Catholic Indian. He was much respected by the Tulsis for his manners and for his large property. He dismissed all talk about Mr. Biswas being mad. He expressed the view that Mr. Biswas was suffering from nerves and from vitamin deficiency. He prescribed Sanatogen, a tonic called Ferrol which had iron in it, and Ovaltine. He also said that Mr. Biswas should have plenty of rest, and should subsequently go to Port of Spain in order to consult a specialist. That same afternoon a lorry brought the furniture from Green Vale. The children said to Savi that from now on she and all other members of her family would be staying at Hanuman House on a permanent basis.

Visits From Relations Including Ramchand

Lying in the room next to Shama's, Mr. Biswas slept and woke, and slept again. The darkness and the silence comforted him. He recalled having suffered great anguish but now he felt peaceful. He began to forget his fears and his questionings. Messages about his illness had been sent to several relatives including his brothers, Pratap and Prasad. Both the brothers came to inquire about his health. He asked about their families even though he was not much interested in them. Ramchand, Dehuti's husband, came also. He informed Mr. Biswas that he had left the rum-factory where he had previously been employed and was now working as a warden at the Lunatic Asylum in Port of Spain. He spoke of the advantages of his new job, particularly mentioning the canteen where the employees of the Asylum got everything cheaper by five to six cents as compared with the prices outside. Ramchand then suggested that Mr. Biswas should go to Port of Spain and should not remain in a backward place like Green Vale or Arwacas. Mr. Biswas said that he would think over this suggestion. When Ramchand had gone, Sushila said that the fellow looked like a real member of the *chamar* caste. Chinta remarked that, no matter how much a pig was washed, it could not change into a cow. Both the women spoke contemptuously of Ramchand, who used to be a servant in Tara's house from where he had run away with Dehuti who also was at that time working as a servant there.

Mr. Biswas's New House Burned Down By Labourers

That evening Seth went to the Blue Room and asked Mr. Biswas how he was getting on. Mr. Biswas replied that he thought that he was all right. Seth asked if Mr. Biswas was thinking of going back to Green Vale, and then went on to say that actually Mr. Biswas could not go back. Seth then informed Mr. Biswas that the new house which Mr. Biswas was building had been burned

down. Mr. Biswas asked if it had been burned down after having been got insured. Seth replied that there was no question of insurance-burning in this case but that the labourers at Green Vale had set fire to it. Mr. Biswas began weeping, but his tears were not tears of grief; they were tears of relief. The anxiety, the fear, the anguish which he had been experiencing now seemed to have diminished greatly. He felt extremely grateful to Seth for having brought such welcome news. He wanted to embrace Seth, to promise eternal friendship, to make some holy vow to him. That night Shama gave birth to her fourth child, another girl.

Mr. Biswas's Fourth Child, a Girl

After nine days the midwife attending upon Shama was paid and sent away. The women in Hanuman House told Anand and Savi that they had got a new sister, somebody else to get a share of their father's property. Mr. Biswas was now drinking Sanatogen, table-spoonfuls of Ferrol, and Ovaltine. He remained in the Blue Room, feeling secure in being a part of Hanuman House. Hanuman House now seemed to him to be an organism possessing a life and possessing also the power to give comfort to those who lived in it. Mr. Biswas had now started giving Ovaltine to Savi and Anand also. The consequence of this was that the mothers of the other children also began giving Ovaltine to them.

Mr. Biswas's Review of His Position and Circumstances

Mr. Biswas came out of the Blue Room and went down into the drawing-room. In the verandah, Hari was reading. Mr. Biswas began to think about Hari's position in the family. Hari spent all his free time reading, but he made no use of this reading. Hari was respected in the house, and outside as well. Mr. Biswas wondered how Hari had been able to achieve this position. Mr. Biswas then reviewed his own situation. He was the father of four children, but his position was just what it had been when he was only seventeen, unmarried, and ignorant of the very existence of the Tulsis. He was now without a job and without any means of earning a livelihood. The job at Green Vale was over; he could not rest in the Blue Room for ever. Soon he would have to make a decision. Yet he did not feel any real anxiety because he knew that his children would never starve. His children, he thought, would always be sheltered and clothed at Hanuman House, no matter where he was at any particular time.

Mr. Biswas's Departure From Hanuman House

Mr. Biswas was now running short of money. Ovaltine, Ferrol, Sanatogen; the doctor's fees, the midwife's fee, and so on. And he did not expect any money from any source. One evening Seth told him that he must think of doing something. Seth also said that Mai (meaning Mrs. Tulsigandhi) and Gswad were coming to Hanuman House

for the week-end. This meant that Mr. Biswas would have to vacate the Blue Room for Owad. Mr. Biswas immediately decided to leave Hanuman House. He did not know where he would go. Quietly, next morning, he slipped out of the house without even seeing Shama and the new baby. The High Street was already busy. The shops had opened. He walked past the various shops, past the Roman Catholic church, past the court house, past the police station. And he kept walking.

PART TWO

PART TWO : CHAPTER ONE

AMAZING SCENES

A Bus : Bound For Port of Spain

On leaving Hanuman House, and his wife and four children, the last of whom he had not even yet seen, Mr. Biswas's main concern was to find a place where he could spend the night. It was still early morning. At the road junction, Mr. Biswas had still not decided where to go. To the north lay Ajodha and Tara, and his mother ; to the south lay his brothers. None of them could refuse to admit him into their homes. But he did not want to go to any of them. Then he remembered that to the north lay also Port of Spain and Ramchand, his brother-in-law. He was yet considering whether he should go to Ramchand who had invited him to his house, when a bus came to a stop close to where he stood. The bus conductor, a young man, bent down and took hold of Mr. Biswas's suitcase, saying in an authoritative voice : "Bus going to Port of Spain, Come, man, get in." Having worked at one time as a conductor on Ajodha's buses, Mr. Biswas had himself often behaved in the same manner towards passengers who stood on the road-side, undecided where to go. So, in response to the conductor's suggestion which was like an order, Mr. Biswas climbed up and took a seat in the bus. However, he was not absolutely certain that he wanted to go to Port of Spain. Wherever the bus stopped to drop a passenger or pick up another, Mr. Biswas thought of getting down and go somewhere else. But he did not have the energy to act upon this impulse.

Mr. Biswas's Arrival at Ramchand's House

The bus had now left the plains and the crops behind, and was approaching the mountains. In due course Mr. Biswas received the smell of swamp and sea ; and then the bus had entered the city, Port of Spain. The bus dropped him in the yard next to the railway station. He was now experiencing a good deal of excitement and a sense of freedom. He drank a coconut from a cart in Marine Square. It was wonderful to be able to do that in the middle of the morning. He observed the size and the number of the stores and cafes and restaurants, the trams, the high standard of the shop-signs, the huge

cinemas which were at this time closed. He then made his way to the address which Ramchand had given him. Ramchand lived in the Woodbrook area. After making inquiries from a Negro woman, Mr. Biswas reached his destination where he saw his sister Dehuti fanning the coals. He was received cordially by both his sister and his brother-in-law. Ramchand said that Mr. Biswas could stay with them as long as he wished. Dehuti even dropped the sullenness with which she had always in the past greeted him. A few minutes later, Dehuti's younger son came back from school and Dehuti sternly asked him questions about what he had learnt at school that day. The boy took out a book from his bag and read out a passage describing a soldier's escape from a German prison camp in 1917. Mr. Biswas congratulated the boy and the boy's parents on his being a bright chap.

Conditions in Port of Spain ; and the Sight-Seeing

Dehuti and Ramchand lived in two rooms. One of these Mr. Biswas now began to share with the boy. The other tenants in the weather-beaten building were all Negroes. Mr. Biswas had never before lived very close to Negroes ; and their nearness now added to the strangeness of being in the city. These Negroes differed from country Negroes in accent, dress, and manners. Women ruled the men among them ; children were disregarded ; punishments for the children were frequent and brutal. Yet all the children had fine physiques. The organization of the city as a whole fascinated Mr. Biswas. The street lamps were extinguished at the same time, and relit at fixed hours. The streets were swept in the middle of the night, and the rubbish was collected by carts early in the morning. Even about Ramchand's going out to work every morning, there was something brave and enviable. Mr. Biswas found his brother-in-law to be a man of considerable knowledge. Ramchand took Mr. Biswas to the Botanical Gardens and the Rock Gardens ; he took him to Government House, and to Chancellor Hill ; he took him to the harbour to look at the ships. For Mr. Biswas a visit to the harbour was a matter of great of romance. He had seen the sea before but he did not know that Port of Spain was a really a port to which ocean liners came from all parts of the world.

Troubled By His Old Fears

At the end of a fortnight Ramchand urged Mr. Biswas not to think of getting a job as yet because he was still suffering from brain fatigue and needed some more rest. But Mr. Biswas had by now spent whatever money he had got with him, and had even begun to feel burdened by his freedom. He was no longer satisfied with walking about in the city; he wanted to become a part of the life of the city. He thought of taking up sign-writing once again. But he did not know how to secure work in this sphere. Ramchand suggested a job in the Lunatic Asylum where he himself was working, and Mr. Biswas said that he might consider this proposal. Then one day

Mr. Biswas was once again haunted by his old fears, and he thought of going to the specialist whose name had been given to him by the Arwacas doctor and for whom Mr. Biswas carried a letter of introduction given to him by that doctor.

A Visit to the Specialist

Accordingly, Mr. Biswas went to the specialist concerned. At the reception-table he produced the letter of introduction which he carried. He was asked to wait. Looking about the room he found quite a large number of patients waiting to be examined. Perhaps, they had all come by appointment. He thought about money. He had only three dollars in his pocket. A doctor in the countryside charged a dollar as his fee, but a city doctor would definitely be more expensive. Money was too troublesome a matter to think about. His mind wandered and settled on the two famous novels by Mark Twain—*Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, which he had found at Ramchand's house and which he had gone through. He smiled inwardly at the memory of *Huckleberry Finn*, whose trousers "bagged low and contained nothing", and he thought of the Negro Jim who had seen ghosts. Then once again he thought of the insufficient amount of money which he had in his pocket. He got up from his seat and, going to the receptionist, said that he had changed his mind about consulting the specialist and that he was going away. When the receptionist asked what was to be done to the letter of introduction which he had given her, he replied that she could burn the letter or file it.

A Visit to the Office of the Newspaper, "Trinidad Sentinel"

Mr. Biswas then went to the War Memorial Park and sat down on a bench under a tree. He looked at the statue of an aggressive soldier. Just then he began to feel some pain in his stomach. He felt that his freedom was over and that it had been something illusory. The past could not be ignored; he felt that he carried his past within himself and could never get rid of it. He now also felt that the apprehension and fear he had been experiencing at the sight of every person in the street came from his feelings of regret, envy, and despair. He got up from the bench and started walking through the streets. He saw a row of newspaper offices, the offices of *The Guardian*, *The Gazette*, *The Mirror*; *The Trinidad Sentinel*. He heard the sound of the machines working; and, through the open windows of the offices, came the smell of oil, ink, and paper. *The Trinidad Sentinel* was the newspaper for which Misir, the follower of Arya Samaj, was a part-time correspondent getting a cent per line. All the stories which Mr. Biswas had read in the newspapers in his barrack-room came back to his mind. He particularly thought of the following lines which he had read there: "Amazing scenes were witnessed yesterday when passers-by stopped and stared. . . ." He entered the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel* and said to the receptionist that he wanted to

see the editor. He was told that the editor was busy and that he should go and see Mr. Woodward. He asked the receptionist to inform the editor that he had come all the way from the countryside to see him. When the receptionist had gone, he imagined what amazing scenes were witnessed on the previous day. He imagined that he, father of four children, had walked into the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel* and assaulted the receptionist, and that the passers-by had stopped and stared when he shot the editor and four reporters dead and then set fire to the newspaper building. As he imagined such terrifying scenes, the receptionist returned and escorted him to the editor.

Appointed, a Sign-Painter At The Newspaper Office

The editor asked Mr. Biswas what report he had brought for publication in the newspaper. Mr. Biswas said that he had as yet brought nothing but that he wanted a job. The editor asked if Mr. Biswas had worked on a newspaper before. Mr. Biswas replied that once or twice he had written something for publication in a newspaper, and that he had read the novels of Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, Jacob Boehme, and Mark Twain. Then Mr. Biswas mentioned the name of Samuel Smiles also, adding the names of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. The editor asked him his age, and he replied that he was thirty-one. The editor then asked what kind of a job he could do, and Mr. Biswas replied that he had worked as a sign-painter. The editor thereupon took Mr. Biswas into the yard outside and gave him a sign-painting assignment. Mr. Biswas was given paint and brush, and he spent the rest of the afternoon writing such signs as the following: "No Admittance"; "Wheeled Vehicles, No Entry"; "Watch Out For Vans"; and "No Hands Wanted." As he went on with his work of painting these signs, he also imagined another amazing scene. He imagined that he, father of four children, was writing obscene phrases on the walls of a newspaper office and that women, who passed that way and looked at those phrases, were screaming and fainting. However, this imaginary happening was driven out from his mind when the editor appeared on the scene. The editor was pleased to see Mr. Biswas's work. The editor then said that he was prepared to engage Mr. Biswas as a sign-painter at his office for a period of one month on trial, adding that during the trial period Mr. Biswas would get no pay. Mr. Biswas now recalled that originally he had become a sign-painter after having met his old class-mate Alec just by chance. As an assistant to Alec he had gone to Hanuman House to paint signs for the Tulsi Store. And now his sign-writing had enabled him to get a job in a newspaper office. He had received no payment for the signs that he had painted for the Tulsi Store, and he was now being told that he would get no payment for one month for his work here.

From a Sign-Painter to a Writer of Stories For the Newspaper

Mr. Biswas started working at the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel* with enthusiasm. The editor gave him copies of London newspapers which Mr. Biswas studied to become acquainted with the style of the London newspapers in order to be able to reproduce the same style in his sign-painting. But he also started writing for the newspaper. The editor advised Mr. Biswas to write something that would frighten and shock the readers. In compliance with the editor's wish, Mr. Biswas brought the very next day a story with the following heading: "Four Children Roasted in a Hut Blaze. Mother, Helpless, Watching." The next story which Mr. Biswas wrote had the following heading: "White Baby Found On A Rubbish Heap." The editor, whose name was Mr. Burnett, said that Mr. Biswas had not yet been able really to shock him. In search of material which could shock the editor and the readers, Mr. Biswas went to the harbour which was at that time full of ships from America and Europe. He went aboard German ships and saw photographs of Adolf Hitler. He did experience a lot of excitement, but there was little to horrify him. He went aboard American ships and wondered at the quantity of the food which was being simply thrown away. He interviewed American businessmen but had some difficulty in understanding the American accent. He interviewed an English novelist, who was comparatively young and whose face shone with success. Then he went aboard a Brazilian ship and, as a result of this experience, he wrote a story with the following heading: "Daddy Comes Home In A Coffin : U.S. Explorer's Last Journey On Ice." This story, when published in the newspaper, was condemned by every reader, but it increased the circulation of the newspaper, at least temporarily. Mr. Burnett confessed that the story had given him a real fright. Mr. Biswas became notorious as a result of the publication of this story, and Mr. Burnett appointed him on the staff of his newspaper at a salary of fifteen dollars a fortnight. Mr. Burnett said that the first thing which he wanted Mr. Biswas to do was to get a good suit of clothes for himself.

A Visit to His Brother Pratap and His Mother Bipti

Ramchand (Dehuti's husband) now brought about a reconciliation between Mr. Biswas and the Tulsis. Ramchand found this task quite easy. Mr. Biswas's name was now appearing almost everyday in the *Trinidad Sentinel*, so that it seemed that he had become suddenly famous and rich. Everyday his photograph also appeared in the newspaper in connection with a prize which the newspaper had offered. In the course of his touring Trinidad as the *Scarlet Pimpernel**; he visited his eldest brother Pratap and found that his mother had been living with Pratap for the last

*As the *Scarlet Pimpernel*—going about disguised. The phrase is taken from a novel of that name by Baroness Orczy. In the novel, the hero visits France in various disguises during the Reign of Terror and rescues many of those who were to be massacred by the Revolutionaries.

several weeks. He found that his mother was a changed woman, that she had now become active and lucid and lively. When he returned to his newspaper office that evening, he wrote down a story under the following heading ; "Scarlet Pimpernel Spends Night In A Tree : Anguish of Six-Hour Vigil." His story described a sleepless night, an encounter with snakes and bats, the two cars which passed in the night but without heeding the Scarlet Pimpernel's cries, and the rescue early in the morning by peasants who recognized the Scarlet Pimpernel and claimed the prize.

A Visit to Hanuman House

Soon after the publication of this story, Mr. Biswas went to Arwacas to meet his family at Hanuman House. Savi and Anand at once took possession of him. Shama cautioned Anand against making his father's suit dirty. Mr. Biswas ate and washed his hands and gargled. Then he went upstairs and saw Hari, the holy man, and Hari's wife. They barely greeted him, and they were unimpressed by his new fame or his new suit. Later, alone with Anand, he asked what the members of the family had to say about his fame. Anand replied that nobody mentioned his fame. Mr. Biswas said that his photograph had been appearing almost every-day in the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Anand said that Auntie Chinta had remarked that in the photograph Mr. Biswas looked like a crook. Shama came, with her latest baby in her arms. Mr. Biswas had not yet seen his fourth child. The baby was a daughter, and Shama told her husband that the baby's name was Kamla.

Mr. Biswas, Asked to Bring His Family to Port of Spain

The reconciliation between Mr. Biswas and the Tulsi household was complete, and the reconciliation was effected on terms which made Mr. Biswas feel that he had won a victory. However, Mr. Biswas had not yet met Mrs. Tulsi who was in Port of Spain. On his return to Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas met her also and became reconciled with her. Mrs. Tulsi now suggested that Mr. Biswas should bring his family to Port of Spain and live with her younger son (Owad) and herself. She told him that they would have complete freedom in the house and that, in return for the food and the accommodation, they could pay eight dollars a month. Shama would be required to do the cooking, to do all the house work, and also to collect the rents from the tenants living in the other two houses which Mrs. Tulsi had purchased in Port of Spain. Mr. Biswas felt that Fortune was smiling upon him.

Ramchand and Dehuti, Delighted

Mrs. Tulsi's house stood on high pillars and was one of the newest and most impressive in the street. Ramchand and Dehuti were delighted at the offer which Mrs. Tulsi had made to Mr. Biswas. They were glad firstly because Mr. Biswas's continued stay

with them had become somewhat troublesome to them, and secondly because Mr. Biswas would now settle down permanently with his family. One unexpected result of this whole affair was that Dehuti could develop friendly relations with members of the Tulsi family living at Hanuman House. Whenever there was any special ceremony or function at Hanuman House, Dehuti would also now be invited with dozens of other women who, leaving their husbands and children behind, went readily to Hanuman House to help in the cooking, cleaning, and other duties.

The Removal to Mrs. Tulsi's House in Port of Spain

Once more, then, Mr. Biswas's belongings were moved, this time from Green Vale to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. The four-poster, the dressing-table, the kitchen-safe with the coffee-set, the hat-rack, the rocking-chair—all these items were duly taken to Mr. Biswas's new abode. Anand and Savi did not leave Hanuman House readily, but remained there for some weeks after Shama had left with Myna and Kamla. Then Savi came one Sunday evening with Mrs. Tulsi and the younger god (namely Owad). Eventually, Anand also agreed to come, when lured by offers of Coca Cola and real ice-cream, not home-made. In the event, Anand did not much like the taste of the "real" ice-cream and, as for Coca Cola, he felt that it tasted like the urine of a horse. Mr. Biswas scolded Anand for making this comparison and said that Anand must stop talking like a country lad because he was now in a big city.

Mr. Biswas's Changed Attitude to Mrs. Tulsi and Owad

Mrs. Tulsi never fainted in her house in Port of Spain. Her attitude towards Mr. Biswas's children was neither distant nor possessive; and her relations with Mr. Biswas himself became warmer. Mr. Biswas also found Owad to be genial company. In fact, Mr. Biswas now developed a respect for Owad for the latter's ability to read big books in foreign languages. The two men became companions; they would go together to the cinema and the seaside; and Mr. Biswas showed Owad copies of court proceedings in cases of rape and brothel-keeping. Mr. Biswas also now stopped ridiculing Mrs. Tulsi for the excessive care which she bestowed on her younger son. Thus happily established, Mr. Biswas now became more authoritative in dealing with the members of his own family. He began to scold both Savi and Anand for being cheeky and insolent towards him. Even Shama did not escape Mr. Biswas's stern and tyrannical manner.

Purchase of Books and a Typewriter

Mr. Burnett, the editor, did not believe in paying his staff generously. As long as he remained the editor, Mr. Biswas's salary never rose above fifty dollars a month. This amount was spent almost as soon as it was received. Mr. Biswas now also learned

shorthand. He went through all the books he could get on journalism, and in his enthusiasm bought an expensive book called *Newspaper Management*. He also bought two other books : *Short Stories : How to Read Them* by Cecil Hunt, and *How to Write a Book* by the same author. Ignoring Shama's protests, he also bought a second-hand portable typewriter on credit. Then he decided to write for English and American periodicals, but he could find nothing to write about, and the books he had purchased did not help him. Then he became a subscriber to a correspondence course which was being conducted by the "Ideal School of Journalism" in London.

An Unsuccessful Experiment

In due course the first lesson came by post. The director of the School of Correspondence had in this lesson asked the pupil to write four bright articles on the seasons and had given a few hints which could be incorporated in the articles. Mr. Biswas wrote the articles, and despatched them to the School. He received a letter of congratulations from the School and was then asked to apply himself to the second lesson and write articles on certain other specified subjects. But this time no hints had been provided. Subsequently, when Mr. Biswas submitted further articles and wanted them to be published in some magazine or periodical, a reply came from the School that an effort had been made to get the articles published but without any success. Mr. Biswas then stopped writing, and the typewriter became idle. After some time the typewriter attracted him again, and he started writing an article under the heading of "Escape". The first sentence of this article was : "At the age of thirty-three, when he was already the father of four children. . . ." But Mr. Biswas did not go beyond these words. He tried again, and yet again he could not go beyond this opening sentence which itself was incomplete. Somehow he could not develop the theme which he had planned to write about in this article. The theme concerned a man who had been trapped into marriage, who became burdened with a family, and who then met a young girl, slim, fresh, tender, unknissed, but unable to bear children.

Good Clothes For Mr. Biswas ; and His Respectability

Encouraged by Shama, Mr. Biswas now began to take an increasing interest in his personal appearance. In his silk suit and tie he never ceased to surprise her by his elegance and respectability. He would cycle to his reporter's job in the newspaper office with a feeling of considerable importance. He began to be invited to parties and meetings by all the important people of the city. Shama too now began to feel important and would often mention the names of highly placed persons when she went to Hanuman House. Shama did not spend much money on herself. She was satisfied with the gifts of cloth which she received every Christmas from Mrs. Tulsi. Her bodices became patched on the breasts and under the arms ; and the more Mr. Biswas complained the more she patched.

Often they had quarrels, and on these occasions she would generally say : "I tell you, if it was not for the children" And Mr. Biswas would try to console her by saying that he would soon buy her a gold brooch.

Children's Holidays

Weddings and funerals were important occasions in Shama's eyes, and she attended them as far as possible. For the children their holidays were important. During the holidays they would go first of all to Hanuman House, though with every succeeding visit they felt more like strangers. There were new jokes, new games, new stories, and new subjects of conversation there ; but old alliances became more difficult to renew and maintain, so that Anand, Savi and Myna would find themselves in one another's company. As soon as they returned to Port of Spain, this unity disappeared. Savi would again begin to bully Myna ; Anand defended Myna; Savi beat Anand ; Anand hit back ; and Savi complained. Mr. Biswas would rebuke Anand for beating his sister.

Children's Visits to Mr. Biswas's Relatives

The children preferred visiting Mr. Biswas's relatives. The existence of these relatives had come as a revelation to the children. It was pleasant and novel for Savi, Anand, and Myna to find themselves flattered and bribed by these relatives. At Hanuman House they were just three children among many ; but at Ajodha's house there were no other children, and Ajodha was a rich man who gave them money. Anand got an extra six cents for reading out to Ajodha the column called "That Body of Yours" from the newspaper in which Ajodha had always felt interested. Similarly, when the children went to Pratap's house, they were most hospitably treated. At Prasad's house they were again the only children.

Owad, to Go to England For Medical Studies

Then came the news that Mrs. Tulsi was going to send her younger son, Owad, abroad to study to become a doctor. Mr. Biswas was overwhelmed. Concealing his sadness and envy, he made a show of enthusiasm and offered advice about shipping lines. At Arwacas, some of Mrs. Tulsi's relations and dependants turned against her for having decided to send her son across the waters to a foreign land. These Indians still had a prejudice against foreign travel. There was some talk about the suitability and adequacy of the food Owad would get in England.

Shekhar and Owad, Entertained By Shama

Shekhar was coming to spend a week-end in Port of Spain. (He was the elder son of Mrs. Tulsi, the one who had married into a rich Christian family and had taken charge of the estate of that family as its supervisor). Shekhar wanted to spend the week-end in

the company of his brother Owad who would soon be leaving for England. Shekhar came early on Friday evening. Shama greeted him with sadness, and Mr. Biswas with a solemnity which he hoped would be taken for sympathy. Shekhar responded in a warm and genial manner. Shama felt honoured at having to entertain two brothers at once on such an important occasion, and she was determined to do it well. Shortly after breakfast that morning she began to cook the lunch. From time to time Mr. Biswas went into the kitchen and asked her who was going to pay for all this hospitality. He asked her whether the old she-fox would meet all this expenditure. He made it clear to Shama that he would not pay any money for this purpose.

Mr. Biswas's Article in the Sunday Edition of the Newspaper

The house in Port of Spain had now become a kind of Hanuman House in miniature. Shekhar bought sweets for the children, and on Sunday he sent them to the children's show at the Roxy cinema. Mr. Biswas now got on so well with both Owad and Shekhar that he experienced the holiday feeling that they were all men together. He began to think it a privilege for himself to be a host to the two sons of the family, one of whom was going abroad to become a doctor. The Sunday edition of the *Trinidad Sentinel* carried Mr. Biswas's article "I am Trinidad's Most Evil Man". The article contained an account of Mr. Biswas's interview with one of Trinidad's citizens and was one of a series of his interviews with the city's richest, poorest, tallest, fattest, thinnest, and strongest men. This series of articles had been preceded by a series of his interviews with men of unusual occupations : a thief, a beggar, a night-soil remover, a mosquito-killer, an undertaker, a birth-certificate searcher, a lunatic-asylum warden. And that series had been preceded by one containing accounts of his interviews with a one-armed man, a one-legged man, and a one-eyed man. This particular article in the Sunday edition of the newspaper was received biosterously by Owad and Shekhar.

A Mishap

After breakfast the three men went for a bath at the harbour extension at Docksite. Anand also went with them. They all had plenty of fun at the seaside. Suddenly, however, the men realized that Anand was missing. Shekhar dived into the water to trace the boy. When he surfaced, he shook the water from his head, and dived again. This time when he surfaced, he was holding Anand under his left arm. Anand had slipped into the water and would have been drowned but for Shekhar's timely diving. They emptied Anand's belly of the water which had entered it, and Anand regained consciousness. He explained that he had simply walked towards the boat, and slipped into the water. Mr. Biswas angrily reminded him that he had been instructed not to move from the place where

he had been left by the men. Anand said that he would never again come out with any of them. Then they returned home where Shama was waiting for them anxiously. Savi and Myna burst into tears when they heard that Anand had come very close to drowning. The lunch was the climax of the week-end festivities ; but Anand remained confined to his room as a protest. Anand ate only a slice of a water-melon which Savi took to him. Later that afternoon, after Shekhar had gone back home, Shama gave vent to her annoyance saying that Anand had spoiled the week-end for everybody and that she would flog him. She was prevented from carrying out her threat only by Owad's intervention.

Anand, Flogged By His Father

The next day Mr. Biswas wrote an angry article about the lack of warning notices at Docksite. Anand wrote a composition at school, describing partly his own experience of having got almost drowned. The composition ended with a denunciation of the sea. The teacher gave him twelve marks out of ten for this composition. On returning home Anand showed this composition to Mr. Biswas, though he was in no mood to talk to his father. The result was that Mr. Biswas, feeling very annoyed with the boy, gave a severe beating to him with a rod. Savi, getting indignant at the way Anand was beaten, said that she could not tolerate this sort of thing and that she would go back to Hanuman House. Myna was also crying at the way Anand had been beaten. Savi made some more remarks of a bitter kind about the family. Anand took his revenge that evening when he pulled the chair away just when Mr. Biswas was about to sit down in it. Mr. Biswas fell down to the floor, and Owad laughed loudly at the practical joke in which Anand had indulged to punish his father.

Anand to Study For a Scholarship

Anand's composition about his misadventure at Docksite had greatly impressed Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas now went to Anand's school and saw the headmaster. They agreed that Anand could win a scholarship if he worked hard. Mr. Biswas thereupon made arrangements for Anand to be given private lessons after school. Mr. Biswas also arranged for Anand to buy anything he wanted on credit from the school shop.

A Family Gathering at the House in Port of Spain

In the week before Owad's departure, the house in Port of Spain became filled with sisters, husbands, children, and the dependants of Mrs. Tulsi from Hanuman House. This crowd of visitors, though only twenty miles from their village, were much excited at the life they witnessed in Port of Spain. They stared at the city sights and they made comments in Hindi which was a secret language in the city. They had brought some musical instruments with them and they played and sang late into the night. Mr. Biswas found

himself squeezed into one room, and would sometimes find it difficult to trace Shama and his children. At night he had difficulty in finding any space to sleep. As a result of these inconveniences, it seemed to Mr. Biswas that the bond between him and Owad had evaporated. Besides, Owad was out for much of the time, making farewell calls. On the last day Seth arrived. His absence had been noted, and now everyone was in an expectant mood. After a final family conference, Owad, Shekhar, Mrs. Tulsi, and Seth looked very solemn. Their faces showed that there had been some disagreement among them. Mr. Biswas brought the *Sentinel* photographer to the house and got Owad photographed. On the following day, Owad's picture appeared in the newspaper with the following caption: "Trinidad's Man Off to the U.K. For Medical Studies".

Owad's Departure

Finally, they all went to the wharf to see off Owad. At the wharf they were told that they could go aboard to bid a final farewell to the man who was sailing away to the U.K. All the Tulsis and their friends promptly went aboard; some of them entered Owad's cabin and sat down on the bunk which had been reserved for Owad. Owad then kissed his close relations, and shook hands with the others. Mr. Biswas was deeply moved at this time. His legs shook, and he felt unsteady. Tears rushed to his eyes, and he could hardly speak. Owad embraced the children, and then his brother Shekhar. Seth cried copiously. Finally, Owad bade farewell to his mother. The crowd of relatives and friends then got down from the ship, and the ship sailed away.

PART TWO, CHAPTER TWO

THE NEW REGIME

A Dull Christmas At Hanuman House

Having no further business in Port of Spain, Mrs. Tulsi returned to Hanuman House at Arwacas, while Mr. Biswas returned to his job at the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel*. From Hanuman House now came some news of internal disturbances. Govind seemed to be discontented. Mrs. Tulsi no longer gave directions because her authority seemed to have waned. Even the control exercised by Seth was of a superficial kind. Mrs. Tulsi spent much of her etime in the Rose Room, grieving for Owad. Then came rumour that Seth was going about, looking for some property to buy. The Christmas school holidays came, and Shama took the children to Hanuman House. On Christmas Eve, the Tulsi Store was closed, and the husbands went away to their own families, leaving their wives behind with Mrs. Tulsi as had been the practice for many many years. With Owad in England, Mrs. Tulsi in her room, all

the men gone, and Shekhar spending the Christmas with his wife's family, there was no one to organize games or to give a lead in the celebrations. The result was that Christmas was reduced to lunch and the ice-cream prepared by Chinta. The sisters were sullen, and the children quarrelled with one another.

Strong Criticism of Shekhar's Wife

Shekhar came on the Boxing Day (the 26th December) with a large bag of imported sweets. He met his mother in her room, took his lunch in the hall, and then went away again. When Mr. Biswas arrived later that afternoon, he found that the talk among the sisters related not to Seth but to Shekhar and his wife. It was being openly said that Shekhar was ignoring his sisters and had fallen completely under the influence of his wife. Shekhar's wife had from the very beginning behaved arrogantly towards the inmates of Hanuman House. She was a woman with modern ideas. She made a show of her education; she called herself Dorothy without shame or apology; she wore short frocks without caring that they made her look indecent by exposing her body. Shekhar's wife was a big woman who had grown fat after the birth of her first child. She had become a target of criticism for all the sisters at Hanuman House, though their criticism proved to be utterly futile. The sisters alleged that Dorothy used her right hand for unclean purposes, that her sexual appetite was unlimited, and that her daughters had already the appearance of whores. The sisters also felt pity for Shekhar on the ground that he had not gone to Cambridge University and had instead been married against his will to a wife who was shameless.

Mr. Biswas's Apprehensions About the Future

Many changes now occurred. At Pagotes, Tara and Ajodha were decorating the new house which they had built there. Owad's old room in the house in Port of Spain was let to a middle-aged, childless couple. And there were many rumours at the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel*. There had been much criticism of the editor, Mr. Burnett. One day Mr. Burnett informed Mr. Biswas that he might be leaving this newspaper, that he might in fact be sacked. However, Mr. Burnett said that Mr. Biswas himself had nothing to fear so far as his job was concerned. If at all anything happened to Mr. Biswas, he could go back to his sign-writing, Mr. Burnett added. Mr. Biswas now began to feel inwardly very apprehensive about the future.

The Changes of Policy with Regard to the Newspaper Staff

The time came for Mr. Burnett to leave. The *Trinidad Sentinel* reported Mr. Burnett's departure on the society page. A new regime started at the newspaper office. The administration underwent vast changes. A booklet called *Rules For Reporters* was printed and distributed among the reporters. This booklet contained

rules about language, dress, and behaviour. On the front cover of this book the following words were printed : "The Rightest News is the Brightest News." The back cover carried the following notice : "Report, But Do Not Distort." Mr. Biswas felt deeply annoyed with instructions of this kind. But the instructions did not end here. Everyday some new directive was issued to govern the conduct of the reporters. There were directives to guide the reporters about how to cover the funerals and similar other occasions. Mr. Biswas began to feel very restive in the face of such directives. He became rebellious and thought of starting his own magazine. For consolation in his mental state of distress, Mr. Biswas turned to the novels of Dickens. Suddenly one day Mr. Biswas was relieved of his duty of writing court-news, news about funerals, and news of cricket matches. He was deputed to work for the Sunday Magazine, and was required to write a weekly feature. He told Shama that, in case the management had put him on any other duty, he would have resigned. Shama asked him if he could afford to resign, whereupon Mr. Biswas said that it was a mistake on his part to talk to Shama at all about his office worries.

Laborious Work, Done Unsatisfactorily

Mr. Biswas was now writing features which were different from those which he used to write for Mr. Burnett. He now wrote a survey of the work done by the "Institute for the Blind"; and he wrote about the splendid work being done by the "Lunatic Asylum". It was his duty to praise such institutions, because it was part of this newspaper's new policy. The new policy was to suggest that everything in this country was going on very well and that Trinidad's government institutions were functioning most efficiently. These features were not easy to write because Mr. Biswas did not actually feel what he was writing. He wrote and rewrote, working very slowly, troubled by continual headaches, completing his articles only to meet the Thursday dead-line. The results were laboured, and incapable of giving pleasure except to the people who were the subject of the articles. Mr. Biswas did not tell Shama anything about his difficulties, but he now lived in constant fear of dismissal. He knew that his work was not good enough.

Financial Stringency. Anand, Ridiculed At School

The war was beginning to have its effects. Prices were rising everywhere. Mr. Biswas's salary was increased, but the increases were completely nullified by the constant rise in prices. There were shortages of food, with the result that there were scuffles at the food-shops. The flour supplied by the shops was full of insects. Shama began to complain and grumble, and she repeated her old threat : "I tell you, if it was not for the children. . . ." What she meant was that she was sticking to her husband only for the sake of the children. Anand now became steadily more gloomy. When one afternoon he came home after his private lessons, he refused to eat or talk but

went to his room and lay down on the bed. Mr. Biswas went to him and asked what had happened to the family Hans Andersen. (Mr. Biswas jokingly called Anand by the name of the Danish writer of fairy stories). Anand said that the boys at school were laughing at him because, according to their version, Mr. Biswas was being treated most shabbily at his office. Mr. Biswas told Anand that he did not depend on the newspaper office for his job. He also said that they could go back any time to Hanuman House where they could all live comfortably.

Weekly Visits to Tara's House. Anand's Truancy. A Letter From Mr. Burnett

On the following Saturday Mr. Biswas took the children on a surprise visit to Tara's house. Tara and Ajodha were delighted to meet them, and the visit lasted till Sunday. In the drawing-room the children gazed at Tara's photographs of her dead relations. After lunch on Saturday the children were sent to the cinema, and on Sunday Ajodha arranged an excursion. The following week-end they went again to Tara's house. In fact, this week-end visit now became a regular affair. They would go there on Saturday morning and return on Sunday evening. Shama went with them on only one of these visits, and her visit did not prove a source of pleasure either to herself or to the others. Shama was often alone in the house in Port of Spain. The children were not anxious to go with her to Hanuman House, and she now herself went there less often. So the house became the place where she stayed, the place to which Mr. Biswas and the children returned after the week-end visit to Tara's house. And during the week Anand's life was miserable. He had to write down and learn by heart long notes on geography and English. There was not a single day when some boy or the other was not flogged at school and made to stand behind the blackboard. For this was a class of the brightest students who were to appear in a competitive examination on the results of which scholarships for further studies were to be awarded. Anand often played the truant from school and was flogged when it was discovered that he had deliberately stayed away from his classes. Towards the end of that year a letter came to Mr. Biswas from Chicago. The letter was from Mr. Burnett. The letter informed Mr. Biswas that Mr. Burnett was doing well enough. Mr. Burnett in his letter suggested that Mr. Biswas should give America a trial. Mr. Biswas wanted to reply to this letter, but somehow he could not find the time for writing a reply.

A Quarrel Between Seth and Mr. Biswas

One afternoon when Mr. Biswas returned home from his office, he saw that his rose-garden on one side of the house had been destroyed and the ground levelled. He became furious, and began to rebuke the two Negro labourers who had been doing this work of

levelling the ground under the orders of Seth. Seeing Mr. Biswas in this mood, Seth told Anand and the other children that Mr. Biswas was behaving as if he owned the place. Seth told the children that, when they were born, their father could not afford even to feed them. Seth said that Mr. Biswas owed everything to him, and that now he was proving ungrateful. Seth claimed that it was he who had picked up Mr. Biswas and got him married to Shama. Mr. Biswas had not been earning anything at all in those days, said Seth. Mr. Biswas was not even catching crabs; he had just been catching flies, Seth said in a sarcastic tone. In the meantime Mr. Biswas felt so indignant that he started breaking things in his room. Seth had got the ground levelled because he wanted parking-space for his lorries. From that time onwards Seth's lorries began to be parked at that place. Mr. Biswas had never thought of Tulsi property as belonging to any particular person. He had thought that everything, the land at Green Vale, the shop at The Chase, belonged simply to the Tulsi estate. But the lorries, Mr. Biswas came to know, belonged solely to Seth.

PART TWO, CHAPTER THREE

THE SHORTHILLS ADVENTURE

A Rift Between Seth and Mrs. Tulsi

Shama now went to Hanuman House (at Arwacas) to inform all the inmates there about Seth's misbehaviour at the Tulsi House in Port of Spain. Shama found Hanuman House in a state of tumult. The Tulsis had decided to shift from Arwacas to the Tulsi estate at Shorthills to the north-east of Port of Spain, among the mountains of the northern range. Shama also learnt that Seth had quarrelled with the rest of the Tulsi family, and that a state of war now existed between him and the family. Seth, his wife, and his children had already left Hanuman House and were living in a back street not far away; they were taking no part in the move to Shorthills. The cause of the quarrel was not known; but each side was accusing the other of treachery and ingratitude. Seth was abusing Shekhar in particular; but Shekhar himself seldom came to Arwacas and it was the sisters who carried on the quarrel. Seth had forbidden his children to speak to the Tulsi children. Only Padma, Seth's wife, was welcome at Hanuman House because, after all, she was Mrs. Tulsi's sister, and because Mrs. Tulsi's affection for her was deep-rooted. It was also being said that Seth was claiming the Tulsi property as his own.

The Move to Shorthills, Among the Mountains

It was never made clear why such a vital decision, namely the move from Arwacas to Shorthills, had been taken. When Mr. Biswas learnt about this decision, he said that the Tulsi family seemed to have gone crazy. He made many sarcastic remarks to Shama about the Tulsi family. However, Mr. Biswas, at the same time

promised to buy Shama a gold brooch. It had become a habit with Mr. Biswas to make this promise whenever he wanted to placate his wife. Christmas that year was not celebrated by Mr. Biswas's family with any enthusiasm because Shama felt very gloomy at this time. Anand wrote in his diary that it was the worst Christmas he had ever spent. "I feel like *Oliver Twist* in the work-house", he wrote. As the Tulsi family had now shifted to Shorthills, Shama sometimes went to meet her sisters there, but she always came back gloomier than ever. Since the quarrel with Seth, Mrs. Tulsi had ceased to be an invalid. She had left the Rose Room to direct the operations for shifting to Shorthills and she was indeed the source of the new enthusiasm. She tried to persuade Mr. Biswas to join the others in moving to Shorthills. At Shorthills, she said, there would be no Seth to annoy him. Besides, Mr. Biswas would be able to save his salary. There were many good sites at Shorthills for houses and, with timber from the estate, Mr. Biswas might even build a small house of his own. Mr. Biswas said that, if he was to keep his newspaper-job in Port of Spain, he would not be able to do anything on the Tulsi estate. Mrs. Tulsi said that he could continue with his job and need not bother about doing anything on the estate. Mr. Biswas thereupon agreed to go to Shorthills with her one morning in order to have a look at the estate. Eventually, Mr. Biswas decided to accept Mrs. Tulsi's invitation to settle at Shorthills with her, though he made many sarcastic remarks about the estate and its environment.

Mr. Biswas and His Family, Settled at Shorthills

Mr. Biswas's first impression on moving to Shorthills was that the members of the Tulsi family had increased, though Seth and his family had ceased to be a part of it. Those daughters of Mrs. Tulsi who had for one reason or another previously lived away from Hanuman House had now brought their families to Shorthills; and there were many married grand-children as well, with their families. Mr. Biswas was given a room on the upper floor of the house at Shorthills. Every one now waited for improvements to be made in the house to make it more comfortable and to give it a more dignified appearance. Mr. Biswas did not, however, bother much about the proposed improvements because for him the stay at Shorthills would be merely an interlude. His job made him independent of the Tulsis; and Shorthills was simply an insurance against the possibility of his being dismissed by the *Trinidad Sentinel*. His stay here also provided him with an opportunity to save money, and also with an opportunity to plunder. He started plundering the orange trees secretly: he would steal some oranges, and also a few pears and lemons, and sell them to a shopkeeper in Port of Spain. To the shopkeeper he would say that he had a number of fruit-trees growing in the backyard of his house.

Shama's Seven Nieces, Married on the Same Day

Mr. Biswas came back from the office one afternoon to find the cherry tree in the yard cut down. A tent had been put up over

the area. The tent was meant for the wedding guests. It seemed that a large number of Shama's nieces were going to be married. Days before the ceremony, guests came from Arwacas, accompanied by dancers, singers, and musicians. They slept in the tent, in the verandah, and in the garage. On the night of the wedding, seven bridegrooms came in seven processions with seven teams of drummers. When the weddings were over, the number of the inmates of the house at Shorthills was reduced by seven because of the departure of seven brides.

Tree-Cutting By Govind and By W.C. Tuttle

Mrs. Tulsi now spent much of her day, looked after by Sus-hila and Miss Blackie. It seemed as if her energy had been stimulated only by the quarrel with Seth and had now ebbed. Govind now looked after the cows. Then the tree-cutting began. One of the inmates who had been given the name of W.C. Tuttle cut down the palm trees along the drive. (W.C. Tuttle was one of the sons-in-law of the Tulsi family.) Govind cut down some of the orange trees on the plea that they encouraged snakes and also served as a cover behind which thieves could hide themselves. Then the Americans came to the village. They had decided to build a military post somewhere in the mountains, and day and night army lorries drove through the village. The Tulsi widows got together, built a temporary shop at the corner of the lane, and stocked it with coca cola, cakes, oranges, and pears. They also obtained a liquor licence, and stocked some rum. However, the American lorries did not stop at the shop to buy anything, so that the widows had to abandon their money-making project. It then came to be known that W.C. Tuttle was selling cedar trees from the estate and pocketing the money. It also became known that Govind was privately selling lorry-loads of oranges, pears, limes, and grapefruit.

Children's Difficulties in Going to Their Schools

Many of the Tulsi children were now going to schools in Port of Spain. They filled the seven o'clock bus at the terminus near the graveyard. As they found the journey by the bus to be very inconvenient, W.C. Tuttle offered to take them to their schools on his lorry, charging them no more than the bus fare. But the inconvenience still remained, because the children had to get up at four in the morning and could return only at a little before eight in the evening. Eventually, a car was bought, and one of the sons-in-law drove it to Port of Spain with the children. Often the car broke down, and then the driver was compelled to ask the children to push it. This car was abandoned, and another was bought. This other car was a sports model with a dicky seat. The children still led a nightmarish life. Daylight was nearly always gone when they returned home.

Several Deaths in the Family

Mr. Biswas scarcely saw his children in this crowded house, and the children got separated from one another too, even though they went to their schools by the same vehicle. One day Savi got hurt while occupying the dicky seat. Mr. Biswas felt that the time had come for him to withdraw from the Shorthills scheme of residence. But at the same time he found that a return to Port of Spain was not possible under the circumstances. So he started looking for a suitable site on the Shorthills estate to build a house of his own. Then, in quick succession, a number of deaths occurred. One of the sons-in-law, Mr. Sharma, died after falling down from an orange tree. His widow shrieked and fainted when she learnt about his death. Less than a week later Hari died. He was one of those men towards whom most of the members of the Tulsi household had always harboured kindly feelings. He had taken part in no dispute. His goodness was a family tradition. There had been no one to take Seth's place; and now there was no one to take Hari's place. About a fortnight later, news came from Arwacas that Seth's wife Padma was dead. Although a serious rift had taken place between Seth and the rest of the Tulsi family, most of the members of the Tulsi household felt it their moral duty to go to Arwacas to offer their condolences to Seth, and they did go to Arwacas. Padma began to appear to many of the women members of the household in their dreams. She told some of them that Seth had forced her to take poison, or that Seth had himself poisoned her, or that Seth had beaten her to death, and so on. Anger was now a stronger feeling in the hearts of these women than grief. Every family in the house cursed Seth and vowed never to speak to him again. Mrs. Tulsi felt deeply grieved by her sister Padma's death. Then two of the sheep died.

Mr. Biswas's New House, Partially Destroyed By a Fire

Govind now stopped looking after the cows. He bought a second-hand motor-car, and began to operate it as a taxi in Port of Spain. W.C. Tuttle opened a quarry on the estate, and his enterprise aroused everybody's envy. Mr. Biswas continued to plunder the oranges and pears and to carry them on his bicycle to Port of Spain in order to sell them. Mrs. Tulsi now started enforcing measures to effect economy in the household expenditure, with the result that the women-folk at Shorthills had to perform many more tasks than before. Then came the scandal of the eighty dollars. Chinta announced one day that someone had stolen eighty dollars from her room. The rooms of all the families in the house were searched. Eventually, the suspicion fell upon Mr. Biswas's family because he refused to have his room searched. Mr. Biswas now found it impossible to continue living at Mrs. Tulsi's house. He found a site some distance away from this house and began to build a house of his own. The speed with which the house was built took

him by surprise. The builders had done the work in great haste so as to give him no time to withdraw from the project. He now shifted to this house with his family. He had certainly achieved independence, but Shama had now to walk a mile to the village to do her shopping, and the children had still to go to school in the family car of the Tulsis. The children said that they wanted to go back to Port of Spain, to the life they had been leading before coming to Shorthills. They found themselves prisoners in the new house, and were unhappy. One night a fire broke out in the wood nearby, and there was a danger of Mr. Biswas's new house catching fire. The children got up and, feeling alarmed by the danger of the spreading fire, rushed to the Tulsi household for help. Several members of the Tulsi household got up and hurried to Mr. Biswas's house. They helped in extinguishing the fire which had already burned down a portion of the house. In the morning Mr. Biswas declared that plenty of charcoal could be obtained from the burnt portion of his house in the building of which plenty of wood had been used. He also said that the ashes could be collected from the site of his house to serve as a fertilizer for the soil. Such were the sarcastic remarks that Mr. Biswas made when his new house was wrecked by a fire.

PART TWO, CHAPTER FOUR

AMONG THE READERS AND LEARNERS

From the Frying Pan Into the Fire

Mr. Biswas now put up a sign at the site of his burnt house, announcing that the house was available on rent or for sale. Mrs. Tulsi agreed to give him and his family two rooms in her house in Port of Spain. But he and his family were not the only ones to move from Shorthills to Mrs. Tulsi's house in the capital city. The Tuttles also went, and so did Govind, Chinta, and their children; and a widow by the name of Basdai went too. The Tuttles occupied the major portion of the house. Govind and Chinta got only one room. With such a large crowd in the house, there could hardly be any peace. The noise became almost unbearable when W.C. Tuttle bought a gramophone and began to play one particular record again and again. A dispute also arose between W.C. Tuttle and Mr. Biswas. Being a man of modern views, W.C. Tuttle then created a sensation by purchasing a four-foot-high statue of a naked woman holding a torch. Basdai, the widow, added to the crowding in the house by taking in boarders and lodgers from Shorthills. The widows from Shorthills sent their children to Basdai because they wanted the children to be properly educated and because the problem of transport from Shorthills to Port of Spain was difficult to solve. All those children who had completed their nursery class at Shorthills were sent to Basdai as boarders to receive their education in Port of Spain. Mr. Biswas now began to feel fed up not only with the noise in the house but also with the insanitary conditions which prevailed there. Every morning, Mr. Biswas left his hell and cycled to the spacious

and well-ventilated office of the *Trinidad Sentinel* where he was still working. His indigestion now became chronic; his children began to suffer from nervous ailments, with Anand having suddenly developed asthma, and Savi suffering from a skin disease. Still new boarders came because even those of Mrs. Tulsi's friends and dependants who lived at Arwacas now started sending their children for education to Port of Spain, and Mrs. Tulsi could not say "no" to them. Basdai went on boarding all the newcomers too. For Mr. Biswas, his office was now the only place where he could find some peace of mind. He began to spend as much time at his office as possible.

Mr. Biswas's Duties As An Investigator

A change was now made by the newspaper authorities in Mr. Biswas's duties. In order to compete with a rival newspaper, the authorities of the *Trinidad Sentinel* started a "Deserving Destitutes' Fund", and Mr. Biswas was appointed an investigator whose duty would be to go through the applications from destitutes, visit their homes, and select those whose financial condition was so bad as to justify some help being given to them from the Fund. Mr. Biswas bitterly told Shama that he himself was "Deserving Destitute Number One". He said this because Shama had lately been complaining about the shortage of money to meet the household expenditure. Mr. Biswas started visiting the homes of the mutilated, the frustrated, the useless, and the insane in order to select those who should be helped from the Fund which had been established by his newspaper. He faced many difficulties in the course of the new work which he had to do. Sometimes, for instance, he was threatened with violence by those whom he had gone to interview. Then various parts of his bicycle were removed by the anti-social elements living in the shanties which he visited. Sometimes he was accosted by bulky-looking Negroes who demanded money from him. On one occasion he was insulted by a prostitute.

A Request For Financial Aid From Five Widows and From Bhandat

One day five widows from Mrs. Tulsi's estate at Shorthills came to see Mr. Biswas. They said that they were in miserable circumstances and that they deserved financial help from the Fund which had been started by his newspaper. Now, there was no doubt that these widows belonged to the category of Deserving Destitutes. But, as they were related to Mrs. Tulsi and as Mrs. Tulsi was known to be a rich and land-owning lady, Mr. Biswas felt that, if he recommended the names of these widows, he might be accused of having favoured the wrong persons. He therefore expressed his regret to the widows, thus incurring not only their wrath but also Shama's. Some time later, Mr. Biswas received another request which also disturbed him. This request came from Bhandat, Ajodha's brother, who had left the rum-shop in Pagotes where Mr. Biswas had served

as an assistant to Bhandat and who had gone to live with his Chinese mistress in Port of Spain. Bhandat had now written to Mr. Biswas that his condition were very poor and that he needed financial help. Mr. Biswas visited Bhandat at the address which Bhandat had given in his letter. Bhandat was living in one of the slums of the city. Mr. Biswas found Bhandat quite cheerful. Bhandat was trying to win a prize in a competition which had been announced by the makers of the Lux Toilet Soap. The makers of this soap had asked for a suitable slogan in praise of this soap, and Bhandat was struggling to frame a suitable slogan. Bhandat's Chinese mistress was a middle-aged woman, with a thin body and a small face. She brought two cups of tea and put them on the table before Mr. Biswas. After having talked to Bhandat for a while, Mr. Biswas said that he would see if it was possible for him to get him some financial help from the Fund.

Mr. Biswas's Visits to Jagdat At Pagotes

One Sunday Mr. Biswas took his children to Pagotes to meet Jagdat, one of the two sons of Bhandat. Between Jagdat and Mr. Biswas there had developed an easy relationship, so that each was always pleased to see the other. Jagdat had been adopted by Ajodha as his heir, and Jagdat was fully exploiting Ajodha. Jagdat had made an arrangement with the owner of a liquor shop in the village, according to which the owner of the liquor shop got free petrol from Ajodha's petrol pumps, while Jagdat got his supply of rum and whisky free. Whenever Mr. Biswas visited Jagdat, they drank whisky together. Their talk would often turn to Ajodha, and then Jagdat would speak about Ajodha's selfishness and cruelty. At these sessions, not only Jagdat but Mr. Biswas also got drunk. In this mood Jagdat would take Mr. Biswas for a drive in one of Ajodha's vans or lorries which Jagdat drove very fast. Mr. Biswas would on these visits often meet Ajodha also. Ajodha would speak to Mr. Biswas about his business problems. And now Mr. Biswas started taking his children regularly to Pagotes where Ajodha's wife Tara welcomed them. Tara was now suffering from chronic asthma. Ajodha was keeping not only Jagdat in his house but Jagdat's brother Rabidat also. Ajodha was keeping both these nephews (sons of Bhandat) because he thought that he could trust them with his business responsibilities. Both Jagdat and Rabidat by now had large families but no money of their own.

Govind, a Terror in the House

To counter the noise of W. C. Tuttle's gramophone, Chinta and Govind had been reciting a series of pious songs from the *Ramayana*. The Tuttle did not retaliate. Chinta began to sing with additional zest. Mr. Biswas felt more disturbed than ever, by both the gramophone and this singing. Govind, in fact, had become the terror of the house. It was as if his long taxi journeys had turned him into a hater of mankind. He would often insult Shama and her children. Shama,

knowing her husband's limitations, bore these insults in silence. Govind even made a number of surprise attacks on Basdai's boarders, and generally terrorized them. An appeal to Chinta would prove futile, because the fear which Govind inspired was to her a source of pride. The story of how Govind had once thrashed Mr. Biswas was related by her to her children who passed it on to all Basdai's boarders so that they felt even more terrified of Govind. A quarrel between Govind and Mr. Biswas upstairs was now always accompanied by a quarrel between their children downstairs. Under the circumstances, Mr. Biswas began to look upon W. C. Tuttle as a useful ally. Tuttle's physical strength matched Govind's, and there was something in common between W. C. Tuttle and Mr. Biswas : they both felt that by marrying into the Tulsi family they had fallen among barbarians.

A New Development in the Domestic Life of Govind and Chinta

An abrupt silence fell on the house one evening. Anand came running into his father's room and whispered joyfully that Vidiadhar's daddy (namely, Govind) was beating Vidiadhar's mummy (namely, Chinta). The whole house listened to the sound of the beating. W. C. Tuttle's gramophone that evening played some special music to celebrate this occasion. Such beatings now became a regular feature of the domestic life of Govind and Chinta. But Chinta did not develop any hostility towards her husband. These beatings gave her a matriarchal dignity and gained her a respect which she had never received before.

A Mutual Hostility Between Vidiadhar and Anand

Vidiadhar was also a member of the exhibition class which consisted of the brighter students who had been selected by the school to compete for scholarships. Vidiadhar was not a very bright chap, as Anand was ; but Chinta attributed the teachers' view about Anand's academic superiority to bribery and corruption. A feeling of mutual hostility now developed between Vidiadhar and Anand. In fact, they stopped talking to each other. With the exhibition examination approaching, Anand led a laborious existence. He received private lessons both in the mornings and in the afternoons. In addition to these private lessons from his class teacher, he began to take private lessons from the headmaster at the headmaster's house.

A Visit to the Cinema

One day Anand told his mother that he wanted to see an English film which had been talked about by his class-mates. Mr. Biswas took him to the cinema but, not knowing that full ticket-money was needed even for youngsters, he could buy only one ticket with the money he had in his pocket. He told Anand that the latter should make use of the ticket and see the film. But Anand insisted

that Mr. Biswas should see the film. Mr. Biswas then got into the cinema-house, while Anand went back home. After a little while, Mr. Biswas too returned home without having seen the film. In order to compensate Anand for this mishap, Mr. Biswas wrote down the following words on his copy of Shakespeare's works on which he always used to record matters of this kind: "I, Mr. Biswas, do hereby promise my son Anand Biswas that in the event of his winning a College Exhibition, I will buy him a bicycle." Subsequently, however, he added the following proviso to this promise: "War conditions permitting." (World War II was at this time going on).

The Exhibition Examination

Anand's attacks of asthma occurred at intervals of four weeks or so, and Mr. Biswas and Shama feared that the boy might get an attack during the week of the Exhibition Examination. However, the attack came during the week before the date of the commencement of the examination and ended after three days. Anand's labours were increased when Mr. Biswas wrote down essays on "Grow More Food Campaign" and on "Red Cross", and compelled Anand to commit these essays to memory. The examination was to begin on Saturday. On Saturday morning while Anand was doing a last-minute revision, Vidiadhar bathed in holy water, put on a *dhoti*, and sat down before a pundit across a sacrificial fire. This ceremony was performed in order to ensure Vidiadhar's success in the examination. Anand too did not escape the ritual. Both Mr. Biswas and Shama took several precautions to ensure that nothing went wrong with Anand during the examination. At last the boys left for the school, Vidiadhar going in his father's taxi, and Anand walking in company with his father. The examination was to be held in two sessions, morning and evening. When the examination was over and Anand showed the question-papers to his father, Mr. Biswas found that one of the subjects for essay-writing in the examination was the "Grow More Food Campaign". However, Anand told his parents that he had not done well in the examination and that, in fact, he had made a mess of the whole thing. Mr. Biswas and Shama felt very depressed to hear this, and the depression spread to the three sisters of Anand. This depression was deepened by the joy of the brothers and sisters of Vidiadhar who declared that he had done very well and was sure to win a scholarship. Mr. Biswas did his best to cheer up Anand, saying that Anand had worked very hard and that true labour was never wasted. Anand asked his father where Mr. Biswas's own labours had led him. (Anand meant that Mr. Biswas had achieved nothing in life despite his labours).

Mr. Biswas at a Meeting of a Literary Group

One day Mr. Biswas received a letter from an English judge functioning in Trinidad. The letter said that the judge would like Mr. Biswas to join a literary group which had formed. Mr. Biswas saw the judge on the following day, and subsequently

attended a meeting of the literary group. He found himself a little out of his depth in the literary group. The emphasis at this meeting was on poetry, and Mr. Biswas knew very few poems. However, there was plenty of liquor to drink at the meeting where the names of poets like Eliot and Auden figured prominently.

The Death of Mr. Biswas's Mother, Bipti

Then one day news came that Bipti, Mr. Biswas's mother, had died. Bipti had been living with her eldest son, Pratap. Mr. Biswas, Shama, and the children therefore went to Pratap's residence. Tara and Ajodha were already there. Shama did her duty and wept. Dehuti and Ramchand had also arrived there to mourn Bipti's death. Mr. Biswas was oppressed by a sense of loss. After returning from the funeral to the house in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas showed symptoms of having been deeply affected by his mother's death. He started going alone for long walks at night. He remained silent most of the time. And he began writing to keep his mind occupied. He told no one what he was writing. He wrote with energy but without enthusiasm. Actually he had written a letter to Dr. Rameshwar, the doctor who had attended upon Bipti during her illness. Mr. Biswas had been told by his two brothers (Pratap and Prasad) that this doctor had been very rude to them when they had gone to him to obtain Bipti's death certificate. In his letter Mr. Biswas compared the doctor to an angry hero of a Hindu epic, and complained that the doctor had abandoned his religion for the sake of a superstition which was spreading fast among the savages of Trinidad. Mr. Biswas was angry with Dr. Rameshwar for another reason also. That reason was that Dr. Rameshwar had got converted to Christianity. The doctor had probably done so for political or social reasons; but Mr. Biswas wrote in the letter that no one could escape from what he really was. Mr. Biswas's letter ran to eight pages. In addition to writing and posting this letter to Dr. Rameshwar, Mr. Biswas also wrote a poem addressed to his dead mother. This poem he subsequently read out to a meeting of the literary group which had been established by the English judge.

Anand, a Winner of One of the Scholarships

Because of the Exhibition Examination and the death of his mother, Mr. Biswas had been neglecting the destitutes. Correspondence had accumulated. One morning when he was typing a letter to one of the candidates for financial help, a newspaper reporter came to his desk in the office and offered his congratulations. The results of the Exhibition Examination had been declared. Anand's name was third in the list of the scholarship-winners. Anand was one of the twelve such students. His standing third in the competitive examination was a fantastic achievement. Mr. Biswas felt jubilant at the thought that only two boys in the whole island of Trinidad were more intelligent than his son. Anand's school had taken the first

four places and won seven of the twelve scholarships. But the biggest surprise was provided by the boy who had stood first. He was a Negro boy of huge physical dimensions. This boy had always been loud in his criticism of those who were in the habit of cramming ; he had always taken a leading part in discussions about films and sports ; he had a vast knowledge of English county cricket scores throughout the nineteen-thirties ; and he had even discussed the subject of sex with friends. He claimed to have had many sexual encounters, too.

Vidiadhar, Unsuccessful in the Exhibition Examination

That evening, Mr. Biswas and the parents of the other successful boys went to the class-teacher's house with gifts of rum and whisky and trussed fowls. For Vidiadhar, however, it was an unhappy evening. He was given no food that evening by his mother. He had not won a scholarship. His mother repeatedly flogged him that night. The newspapers next morning carried photographs of Anand and the other winners of scholarships. The names of several hundred other students who had simply passed the examination, without winning any scholarship, were also published. Vidiadhar's name did not figure in this list either. Chinta told the boy that from then onwards he would have to live on bread and water. Anand received a present from the Tuttles for his achievement. However, his father failed to give him the bicycle which he had promised. Perhaps, the war conditions did not permit Mr. Biswas to buy a bicycle for Anand.

Dr. Rameshwar's Acknowledgement of His Error

It had been a year of scarcity, of rising prices, and of fights at food-shops. However, at Christmas the pavements were crowded with shoppers from the countryside, and some gaiety was in evidence. The year was ending well. One morning early in Christmas week a well-dressed middle-aged man came to Mr. Biswas's desk in the office, handed him an envelope, and walked briskly out of the office. Mr. Biswas opened the envelope and found a note inside. The note was from Dr. Rameshwar who had acknowledged his error. Dr. Rameshwar had come personally to deliver the letter. Feeling encouraged by the response to his letter, Mr. Biswas now jokingly said to Anand that he would like to write twelve more letters expressing his grievances against a judge, a businessman, an editor of a newspaper, a brother-in-law, and so on.

PART TWO : CHAPTER TWO

THE VOID

Mr. Biswas's Interest in Anand's Studies

Anand was now attending a college. Mr. Biswas now showed a great interest in Anand's studies. He went to the college speech

day, though he was not much concerned with it. He insisted, too, on going to the Science Exhibition, thus spoiling it for Anand who could not freely mix with the other boys. In October, Myna was put on milk and prunes. She had unexpectedly been chosen to sit at the Exhibition Examination in November. Mr. Biswas and Anand went with her to the examination hall. Anand thus revisited the scenes of his school days. When the results came out, no one congratulated Mr. Biswas, because Myna's name appeared only in the list of those who had merely passed the examination without any distinction.

A Change in Mr. Biswas's State of Mind

A change now came over Mr. Biswas. The city seemed to have lost its romance and promise for him. His career seemed closed to him. His dreams of the future related only to Anand's future. He now sank into a state of despair as into the void which, in his imagination, had always stood for the life he had yet to live. Night after night he sank. He still investigated the cases of the destitutes and the deserving ones among them, and he still made his recommendations. But his state of mind was not the same. The truce with W.C. Tuttle was also now broken. Anand and Vidiadhar were still not on speaking terms with each other. This silence on both sides became a subject of general talk at the college. Vidiadhar had managed to join the college, though he had a lower status. Govind was still beating his wife Chinta, and also driving his taxi in his three-piece suits. And every morning Mr. Biswas went to the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel*.

A New Job For Mr. Biswas

Suddenly, one day, Mr. Biswas felt revitalized. It happened during Anand's second year at the college. As a consequence of his vast experience of interviewing destitutes, Mr. Biswas had now become an expert in matters of social welfare. One morning he found a note at his desk requesting him to meet the newly-arrived head of the Community Welfare Department. This was a new government department which had not yet begun functioning. Mr. Biswas made an appointment on the telephone for an interview, and went at the time fixed for the purpose. As a result of the interview, he was offered a job as a Community Welfare Officer at a salary which was fifty dollars a month higher than what he was getting from the *Trinidad Sentinel*. The head of the department was a woman by the name of Miss Logie, a tall energetic woman in her late middle-age. She was not a pompous or aggressive woman but an amiable woman having all the graces. Mr. Biswas had known no Indian woman of her age equally alert and intelligent. Mr. Biswas readily accepted the offer. The job at the office of the *Trinidad Sentinel* was a precarious one; he could have been dismissed at any time. But in government service no one could be dismissed just like that. So Mr. Biswas submitted his letter of resignation to the editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel*, and began to prepare zestfully for his new job.

Mr. Biswas's Embarrassment

Soon after taking charge of his new duties, Mr. Biswas felt very perturbed when one day Miss Logie said that she would like to meet his family. Mr. Biswas could not invite Miss Logie to his house under the chaotic conditions which prevailed there. He would certainly not want his boss to come and see the multitude of Basdai's boarders, or to hear the noise of Govind beating his wife. The two rooms which he and his family occupied were not decent enough to be shown to Miss Logie. So he quickly invented an excuse which was that his children were suffering from mumps and that it would not be desirable for Miss Logie to visit his house. A few days later Miss Logie suggested that he and his family should take a holiday before he could seriously start his official duties. She said that she could take them all to Sans Souci, a place situated in the north-east of Trinidad. Miss Logie said that she would pick them all up in her car. It was not possible for Mr. Biswas to make any excuse to prevent Miss Logie from coming to the house to pick him up and his family.

Miss Logie to Take Mr. Biswas's Family For an Outing

At the fixed hour on the proposed day, a green-coloured Buick car turned the corner of the street in which Mr. Biswas lived. Mr. Biswas and his family were waiting on the steps of the house with suitcases and baskets containing foodstuffs. Mr. Biswas had taken every possible precaution to keep away the other children but had not succeeded. The car stopped, and Miss Logie, sitting next to her chauffeur, smiled and waved her hand. Mr. Biswas and his family then got into the car and, pointing to the children who had gathered there in spite of Mr. Biswas's warnings to them not to make an appearance, said that they were the orphans living in that locality. Mr. Biswas would have felt very ashamed of his family background if Miss Logie had come to know that this multitude of ill-bred and unruly children were part of the household to which Mr. Biswas belonged.

The Delights of an Excursion to Sans Souci

On the way, Shama spoke to Miss Logie without any inhibition. She expressed her opinions about the new constitution of Trinidad, about the proposed federation of the islands, about immigration, about India, about the future of Hinduism, and about the education of women. Mr. Biswas listened to Shama's talk with great surprise because he had never imagined that Shama was so well-informed and had such violent prejudices. However, Mr. Biswas felt many tremors of shame because Shama, speaking in English, made several grammatical mistakes. The party stopped at Balandra where they bathed in the sea. Then they opened the food-baskets and ate their lunch on the dry sand in the shade of coconut trees. Then they drove on to

Sans Souci where they arrived in the late afternoon. After dropping them at a vacant house, Miss Logie went back to Port of Spain by her car, leaving the whole house at the disposal of Mr. Biswas and his family. The house was so big that each member of the family could have a separate room, but the fear of loneliness kept them all in one room. In the morning, they were greeted by the winds and the noise of the sea-waves. The children went out and walked on the wet grass at the top of the hill. Then they went to the beach. They made excursions to certain places which had French names. Indeed, they had forgotten the house in Port of Spain and were completely lost in the delights of this sea-resort. And finally the Buick car came for them, driven by Miss Logie's chauffeur, and they were driven back to Port of Spain.

Allowances, Besides the Salary

Mr. Biswas now started performing the duties of his new job as a Community Welfare Officer in right earnest. A certain area was assigned to him. He would go from house to house filling in the questionnaires prepared by Miss Logie. Most of the people he interviewed were flattered. Some were puzzled at being told that the government was really interested in them. He was now informed by Miss Logie that, in addition to his salary, he could claim subsistence and travelling allowance. He felt that the extra money could be spent in several ways. Savi had to be sent to a better school; the food cooked in the house had to be improved; something had to be done about Anand's asthma. And he had to get some new suits for himself.

At a Cricket Match

When his first new suit was ready, Mr. Biswas decided to wear it straightaway. There was an inter-colonial cricket match being held in Port of Spain. He did not understand the game, but he knew that there was always a crowd at these matches. It was the fashion at the time for men to appear on sporting occasions with a round tin of fifty English cigarettes and a box of matches held in one hand. Mr. Biswas spent half a day's subsistence allowance to buy the cigarettes and the matches. Then he paid a dollar for his admission ticket and, holding his tin of cigarettes and the box of matches in his hand, walked up the stairs to the stand. He occupied a seat and, when the match was over, he came outside and cycled home, still holding the tin of cigarettes in his hand.

The Difficulties Presented by the New Job. A Car, Purchased

The interviews completed, it was Mr. Biswas's duty to analyze the information he had gathered from the area assigned to him. And here he found himself in a difficulty. Classifications were a confusing business. He pressed Shama and the children into service, scolded them for their unhelpful attitude, dismissed them, and worked late

into the night. "This blasted thing is making me sick", he shouted whenever Shama and Anand asked him to go to bed. He said that he should have stayed with the deserving destitutes instead of taking up this irksome job. The only alternative now was to go back to his newspaper job, but that would bring him fifty dollars a month less than his present remuneration. However, he was glad that he had written only a mild letter of resignation and that, if the worst came to the worst, he could go and get back the newspaper job. Then a welcome development took place. He was informed that he could buy a car with a government loan on which he would be charged a nominal interest. On a Saturday morning, Mr. Biswas drove to the house in a brand-new Prefect car, and parked it before the gate. When Govind came home at lunch-time, he found his parking-space occupied. He owned a Chevrolet car which was much larger than Mr. Biswas's Prefect. Seeing Mr. Biswas's car, he asked whose vehicle it was. On being told that it was Mr. Biswas's car, Govind said that it was no better than a match-box. What Govind meant was that it was a very light vehicle.

A Visit to Ajodha and Tara. The Car, Criticized

As Mr. Biswas now had a car of his own, his wife and children suggested that they should have an excursion to Balandra on their own. (Previously they had been taken to that place by Miss Logie in her Buick). Mr. Biswas agreed to take them there. On the way they decided to call on Ajodha and Tara. Mr. Biswas parked the car on the road-side, and they all went to see Ajodha and Tara. Mr. Biswas told them that they were going to the beach and had just dropped in for a minute. Tara gave to the children glasses of fresh milk to drink and oranges to eat. Jagdat came in and asked if the car outside belonged to Mr. Biswas. Ajodha was surprised to learn that Mr. Biswas had bought a car. On learning that it was a Prefect car Ajodha said that it was just "cardboard" and that it would disintegrate like cardboard because it was a flimsy vehicle. Jagdat asked if he could derive Mr. Biswas's car and have a little fun. Mr. Biswas refused to let him drive it because Ajodha said that Jagdat would damage it by his fast driving. Jagdat thereupon felt very offended with Mr. Biswas. When Mr. Biswas and his family were leaving, Ajodha said that they should be careful because there was a possibility of a strong wind blowing and because a strong wind would blow their light car off the road. Mr. Biswas felt that even Ajodha was feeling jealous of him for having bought a car of his own. When they stopped at Balandra, they took care to park the car away from the coconut trees. When they were leaving, they found that the rear wheel of the car had sunk into the loose sand. It was with great difficulty that they could get the car out of the sand. On the following Monday Anand cycled to school on the Royal Enfield which Mr. Biswas used to ride. Having got a car Mr. Biswas now handed over his bicycle to Anand, in this way fulfilling his promise that, if Anand won a scholarship, he would present

a bicycle to Anand. War conditions had at last permitted Mr. Biswas to keep his promise. In fact, the war had been over for some time now.

The Departure of the Tuttles From Mrs. Tulsi's House

During all this time W.C. Tuttle had remained quiet. He had not tried to reply in any way to Mr. Biswas's new suits and his new car. But one day, with one stroke, W.C. Tuttle neutralized all Mr. Biswas's achievements and killed the rivalry by rising above it. Through the widow Basdai, he announced that he had bought a house in Woodbrook. Mr. Biswas was very upset by this information. He ignored the consolation which Shama offered to him, and began to pick quarrels with her in order to give an outlet to his irritation. But then came some cheering news. Basdai said that the house purchased by W.C. Tuttle was full of tenants and that Tuttle had filed eviction suits against the tenants in order to have the house vacated for his own use. Then one morning Basdai reported the Tuttle's litigation had failed. Mr. Biswas was jubilant. However, soon afterwards Basdai reported that the tenants had been made to leave the house by a trick which W.C. Tuttle had played on them. Tuttle had persuaded the City Council that the house was dangerous and had to be repaired. The Tuttles now left Mrs. Tulsi's house, and they left without ceremony. Only Mrs. Tuttle kissed her sisters and some of the children who happened to be around when she was leaving.

Mrs. Tulsi, Also Settled in the House in Port of Spain

Mr. Biswas had thought that, when the Tuttles shifted from Mrs. Tulsi's house, he would give the two rooms occupied by them to a tenant on rent and would be able to make some money in that way. But Mr. Biswas's hope was dashed. It was announced that Mrs. Tulsi was coming from Shorthills to take possession of those two rooms. Mrs. Tulsi came with Sushila, the widow who generally attended upon her, and Miss Blackie, the Negro maid-servant. Mrs. Tulsi was not suffering from any precise illness. She was simply ill. Her eyes ached; her heart was bad; her head always hurt; and her stomach gave her trouble. She found it difficult to pass her time. She did not do any reading. The radio offended her. She was never well enough to go out of doors. Her only comfort was talk. Several of her daughters were always at hand, but talking to them seemed only to annoy her. One day she told Miss Blackie that she had no luck with her family and that, in fact, she had no luck with her entire community. Though Mrs. Tulsi scolded her daughters, she took care not to offend her sons-in-law. For instance, she would greet Mr. Biswas politely though briefly. Sometimes she sent for old friends from Arwacas and they came, stayed with her for a week or so, and listened to her talk. Of all the inmates in the house in Port of Spain, Mrs. Tulsi liked Mr. Biswas's daughter Myna the best. She wanted Myne to search her head for lice and wanted Myne to kill

them. Her preference for Myna created some jealousy in the minds of some of the womenfolk, while Mr. Biswas felt very annoyed with Mrs. Tulsi for making use of Myna to get rid of her lice, though Shama told Myna to carry on with the service she was doing to Mrs. Tulsi.

A Visit to the House By Shekhar and His Wife Dorothy

There was some disturbance in the house when Shekhar and his family started visiting Mrs. Tulsi. If Shekhar had come alone, he would have been warmly welcomed by his sisters. But the enmity between his sisters and his Presbyterian wife, Dorothy, had deepened with Shekhar becoming more prosperous and Dorothy's Presbyterianism becoming more assertive. Furthermore, Dorothy would speak Spanish when she spoke to her husband or to her daughters in the presence of Shekhar's sisters, and this too irritated the sisters. Before they left, Shekhar and Dorothy always called on Mr. Biswas, though Mr. Biswas did not relish these calls.

Owad Returning From England. Mr. Biswas, Asked to Leave

It was now announced that Mrs. Tulsi's younger son, Owad, was returning from England. Everyone was excited. Owad was now a highly qualified doctor. Mr. Biswas began to feel uneasy. It occurred to him that he and his family might be asked by Mrs. Tulsi to vacate the rooms which they were occupying in the house, just as on a previous occasion they had been asked to leave Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas had six hundred and twenty dollars with him. It was a big sum of money but it was not enough to attract a loan with which he could buy a house. He started looking for suitable accommodation on rent. His apprehension proved to have been justified. Shama informed him that Mrs. Tulsi wanted them to vacate the rooms which they were occupying. Mr. Biswas said that Mrs. Tulsi was a bitch and that she could not turn them out of the house without providing alternative accommodation to them. He then taunted Shama on having allowed Myne to pick the lice from Mrs. Tulsi's hair. He vowed never to talk to Mrs. Tulsi again. Every morning he started going from house to house looking for accommodation which he could take on rent. The effort proved futile and merely exhausted and annoyed him. However, he was somewhat appeased when he was told that Mrs. Tulsi did not want him and his family to leave altogether. He was informed that they could for the time being move to the tenement nearby and that they could return to the house when the necessary repairs to it had been carried out to make it fit to receive Owad. Accordingly, Mr. Biswas and his family moved into the tenement, but life became even more difficult than it had been before.

A Brief Visit By Mr. Biswas to Arwacas

Everyday Mr. Biswas went to his particular area to interview the residents and to do welfare work. He distributed booklets; he

lectured to the gatherings of people living in the area ; he formed organizations and became involved in the politics of small villages ; and late at night he drove back to Port of Spain. One day his duties took him to Arwacas. Instead of returning to Port of Spain, he decided to spend the night at Hanuman House. No one lived in the house except a widow. Seth was no longer a leading figure in Arwacas. He had tried to burn one of his old lorries in order to get money from the insurance company but had been caught red-handed and charged with conspiracy. He had therefore lost much local support. He sent no threats to Mrs. Tulsi, and no longer spoke of buying over Hanuman House. The family quarrel had become past history.

Return to the Tulsi House After the Repairs

The repairs to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain took nearly three months. The house had been painted upstairs and downstairs, from inside and from outside. Mr. Biswas's ordeal now come to an end. He was invited to return to the house from the ramshackle tenement. However, he was not allowed to occupy his original two rooms. He was given one room, and that also at the back. The rooms which he had surrendered were reserved for Owad. And now Mr. Biswas began to make calculations about the future of his children. Savi was already a grown-up girl. Anand was more than half-way through college. Mr. Biswas thought that soon his responsibilities would end because his two older children would soon be able to look after the two younger ones.

PART TWO, CHAPTER SIX

THE REVOLUTION

A Warm Reception to Owad on His Return From England

Owad was at last coming back from England. Mrs. Tulsi felt very gay. The whole Tulsi clan were present at the wharf to receive Owad. Even Seth had come from Arwacas to receive his nephew. Shekhar and Dorothy were also present. The ship touched the harbour and the gangway was laid down. Owad descended and was received warmly by everybody. There were sentimental tears in all eyes. Owad kissed his sisters and shook hands with his male relatives. When, however, Seth advanced towards Owad, the latter turned away. Evidently, Owad's mother had been writing to him about her rift with Seth, and Owad was therefore in no mood to greet his uncle. Seth held out his hands towards Owad, but Owad did not respond. The smile on Seth's lips died, and the tears in his eyes stopped. Mr. Biswas's heart at this time was full of many emotions. Without saying good-bye to anyone, Mr. Biswas left the wharf, got into his car, and drove to his area to perform his official duties. Evidently,

he did not share the enthusiasm of the other relatives at the return of Owad.

Owad, a Strong Advocate of Russian Communism

Mr. Biswas returned to the house after ten o'clock that night. Owad had already gone to bed. Anand, Savi and Myna ran to Mr. Biswas and began telling him of Owad's adventures in England. They told their father of the services which Owad had rendered to people in London during the War, the surgical operations which Owad had performed on famous men, the seat in Parliament which had been offered to Owad, the distinguished men whom Owad had defeated in public debates, men like Bertrand Russell, C.E.M. Joad, Radhakrishnan, Harold Laski, and Krishna Menon. The whole house had fallen under Owad's spell. Chinta had already developed a strong prejudice against Krishna Menon whom Owad particularly disliked. In fact, the whole family's respect for India had been destroyed by Owad's bitter criticism of the country of his forefathers. Owad had begun to dislike all Indians from India. Furthermore, Owad had returned to Port of Spain as a thorough-going Communist. He had brought a copy of the *Soviet Weekly* with him. He spoke about his meeting with Molotov and of the achievements of the Red Army during the War; he spoke of the many glories of Russia. He said that he had canvassed for the Labour Party in 1945 and was regarded as one of the architects of the Labour victory. He had earned the bitter hatred of the Conservative Party because he had denounced the Fulton speech of Winston Churchill. He spoke familiarly of Russian generals and their battles. He pronounced the difficult Russian names in a very impressive manner. Indeed, Owad was full of admiration for the Russian system of government and the Russian way of life. He said that in Russia a journalist or a writer was given a house, food, and money, and was told to go ahead and write. He said that in Russia even Sushila could become a doctor if she so desired and that all education, even medical education, was free there. The result of all this talk was that, by the end of the week, the whole Tulsi clan was in state of excitement. Everyone now began to wait for a Communist Revolution which would transform life in Trinidad also. Every accepted idea was abandoned. The Soviet Constitution and the *Soviet Weekly* were studied with greater attention than had ever been paid to the newspapers published in Port of Spain. And Owad proved to be an all-rounder. He not only had views on politics and military strategy; he not only knew a good deal about cricket and football; he also lifted weights, he swam, he rowed; and he had strong opinions about artists and writers. Owad said that he had personally met T.S. Eliot the poet a number of times and that Eliot was a man whom he detested.

Dorothy and Her Cousin

Owad got a job at the Colonial Hospital in Port of Spain. Under his care Mrs. Tulsi's health improved greatly. In fact, all the

relatives now began to consult Owad about their illnesses, and he attended to them without charging them any fee. He gave them injections with new miracle drugs which were as yet unknown in Trinidad. Shekhar, Dorothy, and their five daughters came regularly to the house to see Owad. The women-folk in the house treated Shekhar with due respect, but they made no secret of their contempt for Dorothy. One Sunday, Dorothy came with a cousin of hers. This cousin was a handsome young woman who had graduated from McGill University and had all the elegance of an Indian girl from South Trinidad. Owad's talk was endless; his dramatic manner of talking impressed everybody; his comments on people were always sharp and pungent.

Owad's Influence Upon Anand

Anand had fallen completely under the influence of Owad. He had adopted all of Owad's political, literary, and artistic views. At college he told his class-mates that he detested T.S. Eliot. He declared that he was a Communist. Similarly, having heard Owad saying that he detested the painter Picasso, Anand repeated the same opinion at school. However, there was a complete reversal in Anand's views when one day Owad happened to rebuke him at a game of cards. The result was that Anand now began to express ideas completely opposed to those of Owad. Soon afterwards Shama persuaded Anand to apologize to Owad to whom he had been rude.

A Furious Quarrel Between Mr. Biswas and Mrs Tulsi.

Mr. Biswas had begun to find himself very uncomfortable in the house. The return of Owad had made conditions in the house even more difficult for Mr. Biswas than before. One day Mr. Biswas's dissatisfaction and annoyance led to his losing his temper and his making some bitter remarks about Owad. The result of Mr. Biswas's outburst was that Mrs. Tulsi said that Mr. Biswas could go to hell. Mrs. Tulsi also said that Mr. Biswas had forgotten the day when he had come to Hanuman House with no more clothes than could be hung upon a single nail. Mr. Biswas said that he cursed the day on which he had stepped into Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi thereupon said that she was giving him notice to quit her house. Mr. Biswas said that he too was giving her notice that he was leaving. Mr. Biswas, mocking at Owad, said that communism, like charity, should begin at home. The result of this open quarrel was that at school Anand again expressed views opposite to those of Owad. He began to defend Eliot and Picasso, and he began to say that he strongly disapproved of communism.

A House in Sikkim Street, Shown to Mr. Biswas

Having received a notice to quit and having given a notice to quit, Mr. Biswas had now to look for some other accommodation.

One day he met a certain solicitor's clerk in a cafe. Mr. Biswas had seen this man often but was not personally acquainted with him. The man had somehow come to know that Mr. Biswas needed some residential accommodation. So he came up to Mr. Biswas and invited him to lunch in a nearby Chinese restaurant. In the course of the lunch, the solicitor's clerk said that he was living with his mother in his house situated in Sikkim Street and that his mother, having developed heart trouble, could not climb up to the upper storey of the house. The solicitor's clerk said that he had been offered a house in another locality where his mother, to whom he referred as "the old queen", could live on the ground floor. But in order to buy that house he had first to sell his house in Sikkim Street. Being in dire need of accommodation, Mr. Biswas agreed to go with that man to take a look at his house. Mr. Biswas then drove in pouring rain in the company of the solicitor's clerk to see the house. Mr. Biswas was greatly impressed by the look of the house. The solicitor's clerk said that he would sell the house for six thousand dollars; but the bargain was struck at five thousand and five hundred dollars.

The House in Sikkim Street, Bought With Borrowed Money

Mr. Biswas had failed to inspect the house closely. If it had not been raining heavily, he might have walked round the yard of the house and seen the absurd shape of the building. He would have seen that the panels on the eaves had fallen away, and that the bats of the neighbourhood could freely settle down on the eaves. He would have seen also that the house had no back door. He would have noticed the street lamp just outside the house and would have realized that a street lamp, so near the main road, attracted loafers and idlers like moths. But he saw none of these things. He formed only an impression of a cosy house with a polished floor. The same evening a Negro came to see Mr. Biswas and offered to buy the house which Mr. Biswas had built in Shorthills and which had been damaged by an accidental fire. Mr. Biswas told him that he did not own the land on which that house had been built. The Negro said that he would in that case buy only the materials that had been used in building the house. Mr. Biswas sold the materials to him for four hundred dollars. Mr. Biswas now had a total of twelve hundred dollars with him. From this amount he paid a hundred dollars as advance to the solicitor's clerk. Shama was opposed to his buying a house at such a heavy cost, and she actually burst into tears at the transaction into which Mr. Biswas had entered with the solicitor's clerk. But Mr. Biswas silenced her with the taunt that she could be happy only if he and his children went on living with her mother as her dependants. On the following Thursday Mr. Biswas drove to Ajodha and asked for a loan of four thousand dollars to enable him to buy the house. Ajodha treated the request as a matter of strict business. He gave Mr. Biswas four thousand and five hundred dollars on an interest of eight per cent per annum, the loan being repayable in five years. Ajodha at this time did not know that Mr. Biswas had not yet fully repaid the loan which he had taken from the government.

to buy a car. Nor did Ajodha know that Mr. Biswas had not yet been confirmed in his government post.

An End to the Talk About a Communist Revolution

During the week Mrs. Tulsi had been ill but calm. With Owad's return she had become very sentimental. She spent most of the day in her own room. Owad spent more and more time away from home. He began to mix with his medical colleagues and he would frequently go to his brother Shekhar's house to meet his family. He played tennis at the Indian Club. All talk of a Communist Revolution had now stopped in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain.

PART TWO, CHAPTER SEVEN THE HOUSE

A Badly Built House

The solicitor's clerk handed over his house to Mr. Biswas as soon as he had received the payment. On Thursday night, after having obtained a loan from Ajodha, Mr. Biswas took his family to Sikkim Street to show them the house which he had purchased. It was now that the real condition of the house came to his notice. First he discovered that house had no back door. Shama discovered that two of the wooden pillars supporting the staircase-landing were rotten. Then they all discovered that the staircase was dangerous because at every step it shook; and they made many more discoveries of a similar kind. Mr. Biswas now realized that the solicitor's clerk was a jerry-builder.* In his rage Mr. Biswas referred to the solicitor's clerk as a tout, as a crook, as a Nazi, and as a blasted Communist. The house seemed to cry for repairs, and this meant more expense. By the time the repairs were carried out, Mr. Biswas had no more money left with him so that Shama felt compelled to borrow two hundred dollars from Basdai, the widow who kept boarders. But at last they could leave Mrs. Tulsi's house. A lorry was hired and all the the furniture packed into it.

Extra Space Around the House ; and the Planting of a Tree

After Mr. Biswas had shifted to the house in Sikkim Street, his neighbour there told him that the solicitor's clerk was a real cheat, a fraud, a speculator who had made it a practice to build ramshackle, fragile houses and give them a decent look in order to sell them at a big profit. However, the children soon became accustomed to the new house. They would all sometimes think of the various places where they had lived—Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, and the Tulsi House in Port of Spain. There was a redeeming feature to the house which had now been purchased. One day Mr. Biswas discovered that the solicitor's clerk had by mistake put up the fence around the house twelve feet inside the boundary shown in the deed relating to the house. This meant that

* *Jerry-builder*—a builder of sub-standard houses, using inferior materials.

Mr. Biswas could enclose additional space twelve feet wide around his house, and that is what Mr. Biswas did. In the extra space Mr. Biswas planted a laburnum tree. The tree grew rapidly and gave to the house a romantic look. Its flowers were sweet, and in the hot evenings their smell filled the house.

EPILOGUE

Owad, Married to Dorothy's Cousin

Before the end of the year, Owad left Port of Spain. Owad had got married to Dorothy's cousin, the Presbyterian woman whom he had first met in the company of Dorothy and Shekhar on his return from England. Owad left his job in the Colonial Hospital and moved to San Fernando where he started private practice. At the end of the year the Community Welfare Department was abolished by the government, and Mr. Biswas lost his job. Miss Logie left, just as Mr. Burnett had left. Mr. Biswas went back to his job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Up to now he had paid only five hundred dollars of the debt which he owed to Ajodha and now it was not possible for him even to pay the monthly interest which came to thirty dollars.

Mr. Biswas's Fears and Hopes

The debt was now a heavy weight on Mr. Biswas's mind. It was enough to frustrate his energy and his ambition. Under this weight his enthusiasm and his ambition began to fade. His work now became irksome to him. The zest went out of the articles which he wrote for his paper. Living had always been a preparation and a waiting for him, and the years had passed in that state of waiting; but now there was nothing to wait for. Of course, the children were still there to inspire some hope in him. There was a sudden burst of good luck for the family when first Savi got a scholarship to go abroad and when, two years later, Anand got a scholarship and went to England. Mr. Biswas saw no possibility of being able to repay the debt, but he felt that he could wait for the children to complete their education and training and to get good jobs. He missed Anand when the latter went away to England. At first Anand wrote to his father at long intervals, but then his letters became more and more frequent. However, his letters were gloomy and full of self-pity. In reply, Mr. Biswas wrote to Anand long, humorous letters giving him some sound advice. On one occasion Mr. Biswas sent him a costly book called *Outwitting Your Nerves*, written by two American women psychologists. Anand's letters became rare once again. Mr. Biswas could do nothing but wait. He had to wait for Anand and he had to wait for Savi. He had to wait for the five years to come to an end. He had to wait and wait.

A Heart Attack; A Month in Hospital

Then one day Mr. Biswas got a heart attack. He collapsed in his office, and was taken immediately to the Colonial Hospital

where he spent a month. When he came home, he was forbidden to climb the staircase. His having to live downstairs was a daily humiliation because the lavatory was upstairs. He was now full of fears. He feared for his heart. He feared for Anand. He feared for the end of the five years during which the debt was repayable. However, he continued to write cheerful letters to Anand. Anand's replies came at long intervals and were not very encouraging.

A Second Heart Attack; Six Weeks in Hospital

Then the *Trinidad Sentinel* put Mr. Biswas on half-pay. After about a month of rest, he went back to work, climbing the steps to his office, driving his Prefect car to all parts of Trinidad in all weathers, and then toiling over his articles. One day, when he was at his office, he got another heart attack and was again admitted to hospital. This time he returned home after six weeks in the hospital. Again he had to live downstairs. He now stopped smoking altogether. His appetite seemed to have returned, and he thought that he was making a good recovery. But he had still to wait for Savi, wait for Anand, and wait for the end of the five years. He now became more and more irritable.

A Well-Paid Job for Savi

Then the *Trinidad Sentinel* sacked Mr. Biswas. It gave him three months' notice. In the whole world there was nobody to whom Mr. Biswas could complain. He wrote a hysterical, despairing letter to Anand. After more than three weeks a reply came from Anand saying that he wanted to come back home. Mr. Biswas got ready to get another loan in order to get Anand home. But Anand changed his mind, and Mr. Biswas did not complain again. Once again things seemed to be brightening. Savi returned and she got a job at a bigger salary than Mr. Biswas himself could ever have got. Mr. Biswas wrote to Anand that, in view of his good fortune, he could never disbelieve in God. He now began to enjoy Savi's company. She learned to drive, and they would go on little excursions.

Mr. Biswas, Dead

Soon afterwards one day a news-item in the *Trinidad Sentinel* appeared. It read: "JOURNALIST DIES SUDDENLY." Mr. Biswas had passed away. No other newspaper carried the news. An announcement came over the radio, but this had been paid for by the family. All Shama's sisters came to share her sorrow. For them it was an occasion of a family reunion. Family reunions were now infrequent, because they had all moved to their own separate houses, some in the town and some in the country. Mr. Biswas's cremation was held on the banks of a muddy stream and attracted spectators of various communities and races. Afterwards the sisters returned to their respective homes, and Shama and the children went back in their Prefect car to their empty house.

8

“A House For Mr. Biswas”: A Chapter-wise Commentary

PROLOGUE

Mr. Biswas's Wonder At Owning a House

The prologue gives us certain facts and particulars about the life and ultimate fate of Mr. Mohun Biswas, the hero of the novel. An important fact which we learn about him is that ten weeks before his death Mr. Biswas had been dismissed by the newspaper called *Trinidad Sentinel* of which he had been an employee. Mr. Biswas was forty-six years old at that time and had four children. As a result of the dismissal, he faced an acute financial stringency, and his only consolation at this time was that he had acquired a house of his own. As a boy Mr. Biswas had moved from one house of strangers to another; and after his marriage he had lived nowhere except in the houses of the Tulsis—at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying wooden house at Shorthills, in the clumsy concrete house in Port of Spain. And now at the end he found himself in his own house on his own portion of the earth. That he had been able to acquire a house of his own seemed to him a stupendous achievement. Thus the prologue describes Mr. Biswas's sense of wonder at owning a house even though the house was mortgaged.

A Description of the House and Its Defects

Then follows a description of the house which Mr. Biswas had purchased, and an account is given of the various defects which were discovered in the house after it had been purchased. These defects were partly structural and partly a result of the use of inferior materials. Next, a reference is made to the conjugal relations of Mr. Biswas and his wife Shama who had disapproved of Mr. Biswas's purchase of the house but who had reconciled herself to a fact which had

already been accomplished by Mr. Biswas without any prior consultation with her. The prologue ends with the observation that it would have been a terrible thing for Mr. Biswas if he had died without having acquired a house of his own. It would have been a great misfortune for him to have died in the Tulsi household in the midst of the squalor of the Tulsi family which was now disintegrating, and to have left his wife and his children among the Tulsis in one room. It would have been a misfortune for Mr. Biswas if he had died without having acquired his own portion of the earth, and if he had died as he had been born, "unnecessary and unaccommodated". Dying after having acquired his own house was not such a terrible affair.

The Prologue, a Flaw. Suspense, Destroyed By It

The prologue, which the author has provided before embarking upon the story itself, was absolutely unnecessary. In fact, the prologue is a serious defect. The prologue gives us certain particulars and some information which are not at all required for our understanding of the story which follows. A prologue would have been needed only if the story which follows were so obscure as to have necessitated our knowing certain facts in advance. But the story itself is very lucidly written and, by giving us certain facts in advance, the author has destroyed, to a large extent, the suspense which is so essential to story-telling. Knowing certain facts in advance spoils our entire experience of going through the story. It is not clear why Naipaul thought of writing this prologue.

PART ONE, CHAPTER ONE

PASTORAL

Principal Events

The principal events described in this Chapter are as follows :

- (1) The birth of Mr. Biswas; the evil omens accompanying the birth and the evil predictions that are made about the boy's future by the pundit; and an account of Mr. Biswas's childhood and boyhood.
- (2) An account of Mr. Biswas's parentage, his grand-parents, his two brothers (Pratap and Prasad), and a sister (Dehuti).
- (3) The death by drowning of Raghu, the father of Mr. Biswas.
- (4) Dehuti's removal to the house of Tara who is the sister of Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti. No money is left by Raghu for his family.
- (5) The harassment of Bipti and her children by a neighbour called Dhari. Bipti sells her hut.

- (6) The dispersal of the late Raghu's family. Bipti and Mr. Biswas settle down in a back trace in a house belonging to Tara's husband Ajodha at Pagotes. Bipti's two sons, Pratap and Prasad, are sent away to live with certain relations at a place called Felicity, situated in the heart of a sugarcane-growing area.

Character-Portrayal

Quite a large number of characters are introduced to us in this Chapter. They are : Mr. Biswas's maternal grand-parents; Mr. Biswas's parents, Raghu and Bipti; Mr. Biswas's brothers, Pratap and Prasad, eleven and nine years of age respectively, and his sister Dehuti; a neighbour of Mr. Biswas's parents by the name of Dhari; a man called Lakhan who is a carter by occupation; and, above all, Tara who is Bipti's sister and therefore Mr. Biswas's aunt. Of these characters, Mr. Biswas's grand-parents, his father Raghu, the neighbour Dhari, and the carter Lakhan will not figure in the story beyond this Chapter. Of the others, Tara is the most important, besides, of course, Mr. Biswas. The predictions which are made about Mr. Biswas's future by the pundit are interesting. According to the pundit, this boy, having been born in the wrong way and with six fingers, would eat up his own mother and father and having been born at the inauspicious hour of midnight, would grow up to be a lecher and a spend-thrift, and possibly a liar as well. The pundit warns the family to keep the boy away from trees and water, because both trees and water would spell danger for him. In the event, Mr. Biswas does eat up his father who is drowned in a pond a few years after Mr. Biswas's birth.

Tara appears to be a very dynamic woman. When she arrives at Bipti's hut after having been informed of the death of Bipti's husband, she at once takes control of affairs. She is an energetic and dominating woman who has adopted her husband's commanding manner. Tara, who is a woman capable of taking quick decisions, is thus introduced to us :

Tara was a person of standing. It was her fate to be childless, but it was also her fate to have married a man who had, at one bound, freed himself from the land and acquired wealth; already he owned a rum-shop and a dry goods shop, and he had been one of the first in Trinidad to buy a motor-car.

Pathos

Certain incidents in this Chapter arouse our sympathy for those who are affected by those incidents. Raghu's death, the poverty of the family he has left behind, the harassment caused to the family by its neighbour Dhari and a few others—these incidents stir our sympathy for Mr. Biswas and the other members of the family Dehuti's being taken away to work as a domestic servant in Tara's

house is another pathetic situation even though Dehuti would be well looked after in Tara's household. The concluding passage of this Chapter heightens the pathos :

And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis It seemed to him that he was really quite alone.

Humour

In spite of the serious nature of the whole account in Chapter I, a vein of humour also runs through it. The humour is mingled with tragedy when we find Raghu getting drowned in an effort to rescue Mr. Biswas who is hale and hearty and who is hiding under Raghu's bed at home. The omens accompanying the birth of Mr. Biswas and the predictions which are made about the boy's future have also a comic effect on us. The maternal grandmother of Mr. Biswas amuses us by her superstitious nature and by the precautions which she takes to ward off evil.

Descriptive Quality

One of the most striking features of this novel is its vivid descriptive passages. Naipaul shows a remarkable eye for detail. His descriptions are very minute and show a close observation. Here are a few lines describing the adult mannerisms which Mr. Biswas's brothers, Pratap and Prasad, develop in course of time.

They spoke with blades of grass between their teeth; they drank noisily and sighed, passing the back of their hands across their mouths; they ate enormous quantities of rice, patted their bellies and belched; and every Saturday they stood up in line to draw their pay. Their job was to look after the buffaloes that drew the cane-carts.

Naipaul has a tendency to take special notice of the sordid details as the following lines show :

The food was unsalted and as soon as he began to chew, Mr. Biswas felt he was eating raw flesh and the nauseous saliva filled his mouth again. He hurried outside to empty his mouth and clean it, but the taste remained: The blanket was hairy and prickly; it seemed to be the source of the raw, fresh smell he had been smelling all day.

Local Colour

An important point to note about the life in Trinidad is that cremation of dead bodies is not permitted. Cremation being forbidden by law, Mr. Biswas's dead father has to be buried in a grave, like Muslims and Christians,

PART ONE, CHAPTER TWO

BEFORE THE TULSIS

Plot-Developments

The following are the principal events of this Chapter :

(1) Mr. Biswas is sent to the local Canadian Mission School, and put under the charge of a teacher called Lal.

(2) Mr. Biswas becomes friendly with a Christian boy called Alec.

(3) Mr. Biswas's first occupation, a part-time one, is to read out a column from a newspaper to his uncle Ajodha who pays him a penny each time for this labour.

(4) After six years Mr. Biswas is withdrawn from the school and put under the charge of a pundit, by the name of Jairam, to be given the necessary instruction and training to be prepared for the vocation of a pundit.

(5) After some time, Mr. Biswas is dismissed by Pundit Jairam from his house on account of a misdemeanour committed by Mr. Biswas.

(6) Mr. Biswas's sister Dehuti, who has been working as a maid-servant in Tara's house, elopes with a boy-servant working in the same house

(7) Mr. Biswas now becomes an assistant at Ajodha's rum-shop which is being managed by Ajodha's brother, Bhandat. After some time, however, Mr. Biswas is given a beating by Bhandat and dismissed from the shop on a false charge of theft.

(8) Roaming about aimlessly, Mr. Biswas meets Dehuti's husband Ramchand just by chance; and Ramchand takes him to his house to meet Dehuti. (Ramchand is the fellow with whom Dehuti had run away from Tara's home).

(9) Mr. Biswas, who has a very neat and attractive handwriting, joins Alec to assist him in his work of sign-painting. Mr. Biswas also works casually as a bus-conductor on one of Ajodha's buses for some time.

(10) Mr. Biswas's brothers, Pratap and Prasad, have got married.

(11) Mr. Biswas has developed a love of reading. He feels particularly interested in the books of Samuel Smiles.

(12) Mr. Biswas goes to Hanuman House at Arwacas to do some sign-painting at the Tulsi Store, and there he sees a girl by the name of Shama.

Character-Portrayal

Several new characters are introduced to us in this Chapter. There is the solicitor Ghany; there is the teacher Lal; there is Ajodha

the husband of Tara (whom we have already met); there is Pundit Jairam; and there are Bhandot, his wife, and his two sons. Both the solicitor Ghany and the teacher Lal have vividly been portrayed. Ghany is a Muslim working as a solicitor and a commissioner of oaths. He is willing to oblige his clients with all kinds of service if he is paid his fee. Lal was a low-caste Hindu who has been converted to Christianity. Both the solicitor and the teacher have been so portrayed as to amuse us. Pundit Jairam too has a comic side to his character. About him we are told that he was respected for his knowledge, that he held scandalous views which, while being dismissed as controversial, have nevertheless brought him much popularity. Pundit Jairam believes in God but declares that it is not necessary for a Hindu to do so. He does not eat meat but speaks against vegetarianism. His argument against vegetarianism is that when Lord Rama went hunting, he did not go just for the sport but to obtain the flesh of the animals for purposes of eating.

Bhandot, who is Ajodha's brother, gets the impression that Mr. Biswas has been sent to the rum-shop by Tara as her spy. Mr. Biswas discovers that Bhandot is cheating the customers at the rum-shop and making an illegal profit for his personal expenditure. Bhandot spends his week-ends away from the shop because he is keeping a mistress and goes away to enjoy her company. Thinking that Mr. Biswas has stolen a dollar from his pocket, Bhandot gives the young man a beating and sends him away from the shop, though later it is discovered that the dollar had been lying at the bottom of Bhandot's trouser pocket.

Ajodha, the husband of Tara, is described as a thin man with a thin, petulant face which can express kindness rather than warmth. Ajodha can read but thinks it more dignified to have somebody else read out to him, and that is why he pays Mr. Biswas a penny for reading out to him a newspaper column of which Ajodha is particularly fond. This column has the heading "That Body of Yours" which deals everyday with a different disease of the body. Ajodha listens with gravity, concern, and alarm. It is to be noted that Naipaul specializes in seizing the comic traits of the various characters whom he portrays.

As for Mr. Biswas, we find that he is already, so early in life, being dogged by misfortune. However, he remains firm and strong in the face of the vicissitudes of life. For instance, when he has been dismissed from both Pundit Jairam's household and from Bhandot's rum-shop, he confidently says to his mother: "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too."

Pathos

Our feeling of pity for Mr. Biswas is aroused on several occasions in this Chapter. We feel sorry for him when he is dismissed by Pundit Jairam. We feel sorry for him when he is beaten by

Bhandot and driven away from the rum-shop. We feel sorry for him when, in his state of unemployment, he wanders about, thinking of getting a job but not knowing how to get one.

Humour

There is plenty of humour in this Chapter too. In fact, both pathos and humour are the recurrent features of this novel at almost all points in the story, reminding us of a similar co-existence of these two ingredients in the novels of Charles Dickens. We have already noted the amusing portrayals of the solicitor, Ghany, of the teacher, Lal, and of the Pundit, Jairam. Alec is also an amusing character. He is a happy-go-lucky fellow who worries about nothing. Mr. Biswas himself is also to some extent a comic figure in this Chapter, despite the sympathy he evokes from us.

Realistic Scenes and Sordid Details

One of the most striking features of this novel is its absolute realism. An example of this realism is to be found in the description of the various scenes witnessed by Mr. Biswas when he goes up and down the Main Road looking at the various shops in search of a job. He passes a tailor's shop and tries to picture himself cutting khaki cloth and operating a sewing-machine. He passes a barber's shop and tries to imagine himself sharpening a razor against a leather strap. He passes an undertaker's shop, and is tempted to become an undertaker on seeing coffins and wooden planks standing in rows against a wall. He passes a dry goods shop, and imagines himself selling dry goods. As already pointed out, Naipaul takes particular notice of sordid details, perhaps to heighten the realistic effect. The incident of Mr. Biswas easing himself on a handkerchief and throwing the handkerchief out of the window is a disgusting piece of description, as is the picture of Mr. Biswas spitting into the rum while bottling the liquor.

PART ONE, CHAPTER THREE

THE TULSI

Plot-Developments

The following are the principal events of this Chapter :

- (1) Mr. Biswas gets trapped into marrying Shama, one of the many daughters of a rich, land-owning family. Shama's mother, Mrs. Tulsi, is a widow living in Hanuman House with a large family including her sons-in-law, her daughters, their children, and so on. Mrs. Tulsi runs her household and her several estates with the help of Seth, a brother of her late husband's.
- (2) Mr. Biswas gets no dowry; and the marriage takes place at the registrar's office as Mrs. Tulsi would not like to spend any

money at all by arranging a marriage in the traditional Hindu manner.

- (3) Mr. Biswas's marriage does not prove a success because of a basic disharmony between the partners. Mr. Biswas criticizes and mocks at the entire Tulsi family, while Shama invariably takes the side of her mother and the family as a whole.
- (4) Mr. Biswas meets a man by the name of Misir who introduces him to a preacher of Arya Samaj. Under the influence of that preacher, Mr. Biswas begins to advocate the reformist and progressive views of the Arya Samaj. This leads to a widening of the differences between him and the Tulsi family as a whole.
- (5) Mr. Biswas gets a thrashing from Govind, one of the several sons-in-law of the Tulsi family, for having misbehaved towards Owad, the younger of the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi.
- (6) Being fed up with Mr. Biswas's attitude of non-cooperation, Seth and Mrs. Tulsi decide to get rid of him. Seth then orders Mr. Biswas to quit Hanuman House where he has been living with Shama, like the other sons-in-law and their wives.
- (7) Seth sends Mr. Biswas to a village called The Chase, where Mr. Biswas is required to run the Tulsi food-shop.

Character-Portrayal

Several new characters are introduced in this Chapter, some of them very important from our point of view. The new characters include Mrs. Tulsi, Seth, Shama, Owad, Govind and his wife Chinta, Seth's wife Padma, Hari, and Misir. Mrs. Tulsi is a very shrewd, thrifty woman of great organizing ability. Not only is she a manipulator of marriages but she also manages to keep her married daughters and their husbands under her own roof in order to make use of them for running her household and her estates with the active assistance of her brother-in-law, Seth. She has a comic side to her character in so far as she can feign fainting-fits whenever it suits her. Seth is a man with great qualities of leadership. Everything about him is overpowering: his calm manner, his smooth grey hair, his ivory cigarette-holder, his hard fore-arms. He has a strong sense of humour too. He amuses us greatly by the manner in which he tells Mr. Biswas about the gross misconduct of the Aryan preacher, Pankaj Rai. This is what Seth says about that preacher:

These Aryans say all sorts of things about women, and you know why? They want to lift them up to get on top of them. You know Pankaj Rai was interfering with Nath's daughter-in-law? So they asked him to leave.

Govind is one of the several Tulsi sons-in-law. It is he who advises Mr. Biswas to give up his sign-painting and to take up a job on the Tulsi estate; and it is he who reports to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth Mr. Biswas's sarcastic reply to his advice. It is he who gives a

thrashing to Mr. Biswas when the latter has grossly insulted Owad, the younger son of Mrs. Tulsi. Another son-in-law is a man called Hari, a tall, quiet man who spends so much time in the latrine that other members of the family feel tired of waiting for him to come out. Hari believes in chewing every mouthful of food forty times and is, besides, a noisy eater. It is Hari who, because of his knowledge of holy books, functions as the priest when any religious ceremony or ritual is to be performed. Mr. Biswas refers to Hari as the "constipated holy man". It becomes once again evident to us that Naipaul is an adept in a comic portrayal of characters.

The Organization of the Tulsi Household

An important point to note in this Chapter is the author's account of the organization of the Tulsi household. We are informed that the Tulsi daughters and their children have to sweep the floors, wash the clothes, cook the food, and serve as assistants in the Tulsi Store. The Tulsi sons-in-law have to work under Seth's supervision on the Tulsi estates. In return, all of them are given food, accommodation, and some money; and, besides, their children are properly looked after. In other words, the Tulsi household is an example of a joint family system which has an appearance of benevolence and generosity but which actually is a dictatorship with Mrs. Tulsi and Seth at the head of the organization.

Mr. Biswas's Rebellion; and His Capacity for Sarcastic Remarks

A small indiscretion on the part of Mr. Biswas leads to his being trapped into a marriage with Shama, one of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi. Although soon afterwards he begins to feel that this marriage was a mistake, yet it is doubtful if he could have got a better match in Trinidad. Even the Tulsi family has accepted him as a son-in-law only because he belongs to a high caste among the Hindus and, furthermore, because Mrs. Tulsi would not like to spend any money on Shama's marriage. As his marriage to Shama necessitates his living in Hanuman House under the authority of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, he begins to feel restless. By nature he is an independent-minded man, and the sense of subordination to the two autocrats in the family makes him unhappy. In the context of this marriage, the author writes :

They (Seth and Mrs. Tulsi) had married Shama to him simply because he was of the proper caste, just as they had married the daughter called C* to an illiterate coconut-seller.

Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi.

At once he rebelled.

Mr. Biswas begins to criticize Shama and to give expression to his irritation by mocking at her family of which she feels very proud.

He adopts, at least for a time, the unorthodox views preached by an Aryan missionary only to spite the conservative Tulsi household. When one day Govind advises him to give up sign-painting and take up a job on the Tulsi estate, he says that he would never give up his independence because his motto in life is : "Paddle your own canoe". He says that he would rather catch crabs or sell coconuts than work for the Tulsis. He mockingly refers to Mrs. Tulsi as the "old queen" as the "old cow", and as the "old hen", subsequently describing her to Shama as a "she-fox". In the same mocking tones he refers to Seth as the "Big Boss", and refers to the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi as "gods". On account of his rebellious and defiant attitude towards the Tulsi household, he comes to be regarded as a buffoon and a trouble-maker. When he goes to the extent of throwing a plateful of food over the head of one of the Tulsi sons and even spitting upon him, he is thrashed by Govind. The two principal traits of Mr. Biswas's character which strike us here are firstly his independent-mindedness and secondly his capacity for making sarcastic remarks. His independent-mindedness leads him to various acts of defiance and rebellion, while his capacity for sarcasm makes him indulge in all sorts of disparaging and amusing comments on the Tulsi family.

Misir, an Aryan Convert

Another character who is introduced to us in this Chapter is Misir. This man is an Aryan convert, and is by profession a part-time journalist. It is Misir who encourages Mr. Biswas to meet the Aryan Missionary called Pankaj Rai. Misir takes an active part in the campaign against the orthodoxy of Hindus and tries to preach the progressive views advocated by Arya Samaj. He is willing even to use coercion to convert the orthodox Hindus to the new creed preached by the Aryans. Even Mr. Biswas says that, if peaceful persuasion fails, they should make use of the sword. But, of course, Mr. Biswas believes in violence only theoretically. Misir has invented the phrase "cat-in-bag" to describe the old Hindu system of pre-arranged marriages. He holds the view that young men should be allowed to choose their own spouses. He is dissatisfied with his own spouse because his marriage was a "cat-in-bag" affair.

Humour

A vein of humour runs through the whole of this Chapter. Mr. Biswas's reactions to the behaviour of the Tulsi family and the autocracy of Seth and Mrs. Tulsi have been described in a very amusing manner. Mr. Biswas's wit contributes greatly to the comedy of this Chapter. His witty attacks upon Shama's family earn him the reputation of being a buffoon. Misir too contributes to the humour in this Chapter by his way of expressing his ideas. When Mr. Biswas is thrashed by Govind, the situation is funny rather than pathetic, because of our feeling that Mr. Biswas has really misbehaved and deserves to be punished.

PART ONE, CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHASE

Plot-Developments

- (1) Mr. Biswas is now settled at The Chase and has to run the Tulsi food-shop.
- (2) Amid the sordidness and the monotony of his life here, he hopes that his stay at The Chase would only be a transitional period and a preparation for a better life to come.
- (3) At Shama's insistence and, contrary to his own wishes, Mr. Biswas agrees to hold a house-blessing ceremony to be performed by Hari, one of the Tulsi sons-in-law, who functions as the family pundit also. The house-blessing ceremony is attended by almost all members of the Tulsi clan and their innumerable children who create a lot of tumult in the house and do some damage to property.
- (4) Business at the Tulsi food-shop begins to dwindle because the customers who had been buying things from Mr. Biswas on credit have stopped coming to the shop in order to avoid paying what they owe to him.
- (5) Shama goes back to Hanuman House for her delivery. She gives birth to a daughter who is given the name Savi by Seth and Hari.
- (6) Mr. Biswas again comes into conflict with the Tulsi family because of his chronic grudge against it.
- (7) Mr. Biswas gets involved in litigation when he is advised by a tout called Moti to give a legal notice to Mungroo, one of the customers who owe to Mr. Biswas a big amount of money but who have been evading payment. As a result of this litigation, Mr. Biswas suffers a heavy financial loss. He has been duped by the tout Moti.
- (8) Mr. Biswas spends a total of six years at The Chase. During this period Shama gives birth to three children, the first a daughter named Savi who has already been mentioned above, then to a son who is given the name Anand by Seth, and next to a daughter who is given the name Myna. By the time this Chapter ends, Savi has already begun to go to school.
- (9) For some time during these six years a change occurs in Mr. Biswas's attitude to Hanuman House. He begins to regard Hanuman House as a place of refuge from the outside world.
- (10) Then comes a time when Mr. Biswas begins to harbour fears about his future. These fears show a morbid streak in his nature, despite his wit and his sense of humour. Mr. Biswas is a sensitive kind of man.

- (11) A serious quarrel one day takes place between Mr. Biswas and Shama when she says that she can no longer live at The Chase. Shama leaves the shop and goes back to Hanuman House. However, a reconciliation takes place when Shama gives birth to her third child (a daughter) even though the birth of yet another daughter does not please Mr. Biswas much.
- (12) As the shop is no longer a source of profit or income, Seth offers Mr. Biswas a job as an overseer at the Tulsi estate at a place called Green Vale. Mr. Biswas accepts the offer at Shama's insistence.

Character-Portrayal

Among the new characters introduced in this Chapter is Moti, the tout who misleads Mr. Biswas into serving a notice upon Mungroo through a lawyer called Seebaran. The other new character is Mungroo who is the village bully and who turns the tables upon Mr. Biswas by filing a defamation suit against Mr. Biswas through a lawyer by the name of Mahmoud. It is sheer inexperience of life which leads Mr. Biswas to get entangled in litigation. At the end of this litigation Mr. Biswas finds himself in debt.

A Development in Shama's Character

At The Chase, Shama shows herself to be a very enterprising woman. Till the last she had protested against leaving Hanuman House in order to move to The Chase; but, having once arrived at The Chase, she shows a lot of initiative. Her actions here are assertive and noisy; they fill both the shop and the house, and they banish silence and loneliness. Mr. Biswas knows nothing about keeping accounts. It is Shama who begins to keep the accounts, and it is she who suggests that he should keep a record of goods sold on credit. However, the relations between Shama and Mr. Biswas continue to be formal and impersonal. No real intimacy develops between them. Being accustomed to the ways of the Tulsi family, Shama insists upon a house-blessing ceremony being performed; and Mr. Biswas has to submit to her pressure. During the six years of the stay at The Chase, Shama shows a good deal of development in her character. Previously Mr. Biswas had known her as a girl, romping up and down the staircase of Hanuman House and as a prankster.* At The Chase she is the wife and the housekeeper and, during these six years, she becomes the mother of as many as three children.

Mr. Biswas's Resentment Against the Tulsi Family

Mr. Biswas greatly resents that his children should be named by Seth, or by Hari, the family priest. He regards this action by the Tulsi household as an encroachment upon his own rights as a parent.

*Prankster—a mischievous or naughty person.

He strongly protests to Shama against the children being named by Seth and others. He also strongly resents his occupation having been shown in Savi's birth-certificate as that of a labourer. He tells Shama that the least that could have been done was to have specified his occupation as that of a sign-painter. In fact, he says, his occupation on the certificate could have been shown as that of a shop-proprietor. Mr. Biswas's reaction to the children's breaking his bottles in order to obtain the marbles from them is one of great anger. In order to appease him, one of the mothers gives a good beating to her child, at the same time feeling deeply resentful of Mr. Biswas's condemnation of the children who were breaking the bottles. Mr. Biswas's capacity for making witty and sarcastic remarks is fully displayed in this Chapter also. Indeed, Mr. Biswas never loses his sense of humour. He is an accomplished mocker whose wit never fails him. This wit is a source of much laughter for us in this Chapter.

Humour and Wit

A vein of humour runs through this Chapter also. There are only a couple of passages which have been written in a serious tone because they describe Mr. Biswas's fears about his future; but otherwise the Chapter is pervaded by a vein of comedy. Much of the comedy proceeds from Mr. Biswas's sarcastic remarks. When Mrs. Tulsi says to him in a complacent tone that the shop at The Chase is a nice little property for him, he informs her in a sarcastic manner that the roofs of both the shop and the bed-room leak during rains and that the accommodation is woefully inadequate. When she suggests that he should make use of a sugarsack in order to cover the gallery and thus gain extra accommodation, he inwardly says that he would like to bury her in a sugarsack. He then mocks at her by asking her to send him a coal-barrel because his whole family would be able to live in a coal-barrel. When Mr. Biswas finds that he is not making much profit from the shop, he asks Shama if it would be possible to summon Hari again to The Chase, this time to "un-bless" the house. When Seth one day asks Mr. Biswas whether the shop has gone bankrupt or not as yet, Mr. Biswas makes the following retort: "Give it a little time. After all, it is only about four months since Hari blessed it."

Descriptive Quality

Naipaul's descriptive talent is to be seen in almost every Chapter. Naipaul has a genius for recording minute details while describing places and scenes. His description of The Chase and, more especially of the food-shop which Mr. Biswas has to run, is very vivid and abounds in small details. It is a most realistic description. Another example of Naipaul's capacity for giving us vivid descriptions is to be found in the passage where he gives us an account of the women-folk on the night preceding the house-blessing ceremony. Here is that description:

The cooking was being done, under the superintendence of Sushila, over an open fire-hole in the yard. Sisters stirred enormous black cauldrons brought for the occasion from Hanuman House. They sweated and complained but they were happy. Though there was no need for it, some had stayed awake all the previous night peeling potatoes, cleaning rice, cutting vegetables, singing, drinking coffee. They had prepared bin after bin of rice, bucket upon bucket of lentils and vegetables, vats of tea and coffee, volumes of *chapattis*.

PART ONE, CHAPTER FIVE

GREEN VALE

Plot-Developments

- (1) Mr. Biswas now begins a new life at Green Vale where he and his family are given a room in the barracks. He has to work as an overseer at the Tulsi estate on twenty-five dollars a month.
- (2) Seth visits this place every Saturday to pay to the labourers their wages for the week.
- (3) Mr. Biswas feels keenly dissatisfied with this new job because he has no previous experience of it. He begins to blame Shama and her family for having got him into this difficulty.
- (4) Shama goes frequently to Hanuman House with the children to stay there. On such occasions Mr. Biswas has to cook his food himself.
- (5) On Christmas Mr. Biswas gives his daughter Savi a doll's house as a present. His giving of a present to his daughter only and ignoring all the other children leads to a lot of unpleasantness in the Tulsi household. Harassed by her sisters' taunting remarks, Shama breaks the doll's house and throws it on the rubbish-heap. When Mr. Biswas comes to know of Shama's action, he resents it greatly.
- (6) As a protest against Shama's action, Mr. Biswas takes Savi with him to Green Vale. However, the one week which he and Savi spend there together proves to be a most miserable period. Then Shama and the children also come to Green Vale though they all go back after a couple of days because Savi's school is opening after the Christmas holidays.
- (7) Left alone at Green Vale, Mr. Biswas once again feels troubled by fears about his future. In fact, his fears now become a kind of nightmare.
- (8) Mrs. Tulsi's elder son, Shekhar, gets married to a Christian girl called Dorothy. She belongs to the Presbyterian sect of Christianity.

- (9) On one of his visits to Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas has an unpleasant exchange of remarks with Chinta (generally called C), the wife of Govind.
- (10) Mr. Biswas now forms a plan to build a house, though he does not have enough money for the purpose.
- (11) The construction of the house begins, but the house remains incomplete because Mr. Biswas is unable to arrange the money needed to complete it.
- (12) Mr. Biswas begins to experience a sense of futility. He is once again haunted by morbid thoughts and visions.
- (13) Mr. Biswas brings his son Anand to stay with him, but his morbidity does not diminish in the least.
- (14) Mr. Biswas now shifts from the barracks into the only completed room of the newly-built but incomplete house. Here he again feels overwhelmed by fears of unknown dangers. In fact, these fears begin to obsess his mind.
- (15) When Shama comes on a visit to him, he quarrels with her and kicks her in the belly. Subsequently, he realizes the blunder that he has committed because Shama was at this time pregnant once more.
- (16) One night a furious storm begins to blow. There is a heavy downpour of rain. There is the roar of thunder and there are flashes of lightning. Mr. Biswas who had already been having abnormal thoughts now falls very ill, physically as well as mentally.

Character-Portrayal

The importance of this Chapter lies mainly in the way in which the character of Mr. Biswas develops. First, there is the episode of his giving a Christmas present to his daughter Savi. By giving a present to Savi and giving nothing to any of the other children he is found guilty of having defied the Tulsi code once again. Mrs. Tulsi has never exercised any discrimination in favour of, or against, any particular child or children. All children have uniformly been treated at Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas, however, deviates from convention and offends not only Mrs. Tulsi but all the other women-folk who feel that their children have been ignored. His choice of a doll's house as a present for Savi has also a symbolic significance. Whether or not he is himself aware of the significance of his choosing a doll's house as a present, the fact remains that this choice represents a desire on his part to possess a house of his own. Secondly, Mr. Biswas in this Chapter gives a concrete expression to his desire to own a house. He has a feeling that, if he does not take any step in the direction of building a house of his own, he would descend into a void. Accordingly, one Saturday, he asks Seth to let him some land for building a house upon and he offers to pay the needful rent for the land he is asking for. Seth, however, dismisses the idea of rent for

the land, and gives Mr. Biswas the green signal for building a house of his own. The construction of the house then begins, although the house is never completed on account of a shortage of funds. Even Mr. Biswas's desire to own a house has a symbolic significance. This desire shows that he wishes to establish an identity of his own. Here we should note the importance of the title of the novel. The author regards Mr. Biswas's building a house of his own as something vital to Mr. Biswas's well-being, something on which Mr. Biswas's happiness mainly depends. The ownership of a house would give to Mr. Biswas a feeling of his own independent existence in this world, a feeling of his own individuality. His self-esteem requires that he should not continue to live as a dependant of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. Thirdly, this Chapter emphasizes the morbid element in Mr. Biswas's nature. Already at *The Chase* he had begun to feel despondent, but now at *Green Vale* his despondency deepens to such an extent that his very sanity is threatened. He begins to be haunted by strange fears and questionings. He begins to have a sense of futility in life; he feels lonely and desolate; he experiences a feeling of frustration; he becomes almost a psychopath.* This mental state develops chiefly because of his inability to arrange for the required money to complete the house. His effort to obtain a loan from Ajodha proves abortive, and the house remains incomplete. Then his dog, to which he had given the name of Tarzan, is found murdered one morning. The heavy rain and the storm one night aggravate his malady. The fury of the elements on that night symbolizes the tumult going on in Mr. Biswas's own mind :

Lightning; thunder; the rain on roof and walls; the loose iron sheet; the wind pushing against the house, pausing, and pushing again.

Then there was a roar that overrode them all. When it struck the house the window burst open, the lamp went instantly out, the rain lashed in, the lightning lit up the room and the world outside, and when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void.

Anand, who has been staying with his father in the incomplete house built by the latter, feels greatly frightened to see all this and begins to scream; and, as for Mr. Biswas, he receives a mental shock so that his condition becomes serious.

A Serious, Almost Grim, Chapter

This is a serious, almost grim, Chapter which describes Mr. Biswas hovering on the verge of insanity. Only about a dozen of the ninety pages of this Chapter provide some emotional relief to us. In those dozen pages the author gives us an account of how Mr. Biswas goes to Ajodha in order to ask him for a loan and how he is thwarted

**Psychopath*—one who is suffering from a mental illness.

in his attempt. This account is written in a light tone and the behaviour of Ajodha and his two nephews (Rabidat and Jagdat) is quite amusing. Tara privately informs Mrs. Biswas that her husband's two nephews are always asking him for money and that he therefore often becomes angry with them. She also says that the two young men have been spreading all sorts of stories about her husband. Jagdat too gets an opportunity to speak to Mr. Biswas privately. Jagdat complains to Mr. Biswas that Ajodha is a very miserly kind of man. Jagdat goes on to tell Mr. Biswas that Ajodha, to whom he refers as the son of a bitch, is doing nothing to help his brother Bhandot who is living in a small room in a ramshackle old house full of Creoles. The episode of Mr. Biswas's visit to his aunt Tara's house and his talk with various members of the family constitutes an important part of the general social picture of the life of Hindus who have settled in Trinidad.

The Psychological Value of This Chapter

This Chapter has a great psychological value because of the light it throws upon the working of Mr. Biswas's mind. Several pages of this Chapter have been devoted to an analysis of Mr. Biswas's mind and to an account of the thoughts which trouble him. When Mr. Biswas one day goes to Hanuman House, every man and woman he sees, even at a distance, gives him "a twist of panic". Everything he sees seems to be sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, and every turn in the road. Every day that passes now deepens his fear. The hours of lucidity go on diminishing with every day that passes, until there is no lucidity at all, and all action seems to him irrelevant and futile.

The Need of Religious Faith

In the midst of the loneliness, and again in the midst of the fury of the elements and the fright caused by it, Mr. Biswas urges his son Anand to keep repeating the name of "Rama". He tells the boy that, if he keeps saying *Rama Rama Sita Rama*, no harm would come to him. Thus, in the hour of crisis, Mr. Biswas can think only of the traditional remedy in which every orthodox Hindu believes. This incident shows that, basically, human beings can obtain some relief from their misery and distress only by falling back upon their religious faith. Indeed, there is no alternative to religious faith at such times.

A New Character, Mr. Maclean

A new character is introduced in this Chapter. He is Mr. Maclean, a Christian Negro, who is engaged by Mr. Biswas to build his house. Mr. Maclean is quite an interesting kind of man. Mr. Maclean is a carpenter and cabinet-maker; he is also a blacksmith and a painter; he makes tin-cups and he solders vessels; he sells fresh eggs too. He proves to be a helpful kind of man, and he

suggests several ways in which Mr. Biswas can save money on the building of the house. Mr Maclean is a minor character who will have no further part to play in the novel.

Naipaul's Descriptive Talent

Naipaul's descriptive talent is seen once again in this Chapter, in the manner in which he describes Green Vale :

Whenever afterwards Mr. Biswas thought of Green Vale he thought of the trees. They were tall and straight, and so hung with long, drooping leaves that their trunks were hidden and appeared to be branchless. . . . Green Vale was damp and shadowed and close. The trees darkened the road and their rotting leaves choked the grass gutters. The trees surrounded the barracks.

As pointed out earlier in connection with preceding chapters, Mr. Biswas has a remarkable power of noting details. Here is an example from the present Chapter :

He (Mr. Biswas) took to eating at the green table in the room, hidden from the front door, his back to the side window, and determined not to look up at the black, furry underside of the galvanized iron roof. As he ate he read the newspapers on the wall. The smell of damp and soot, old paper and stale tobacco reminded him of the smell of his father's box under the bed which rested on tree-branches buried in the earth floor.

Mr. Biswas often stares at the walls of his room and reads the headlines on the newspaper-sheets pasted there. One line particularly catches his attention and afterwards it occurs to his mind again and again. This line is : "Amazing Scenes Were Witnessed Yesterday When. . . ."

Shekhar's Marriage Versus Mrs. Tulsi's Orthodoxy

A notable event which finds mention in this Chapter is Shekhar's marriage to a Christian girl. Mrs. Tulsi had been looking for a suitable girl from among the handful of well-to-do Hindu families, but Shekhar had expressed his disapproval of all of them and had even threatened to commit suicide in case he was forced to marry any one of them. Eventually, he agrees to marry a girl from a Presbyterian family. This marriage shows how hollow are Mrs. Tulsi's claims to religious orthodoxy. The Tulsi family maintains an appearance of rigidity in religious matters and is very scrupulous about performing all the prescribed ceremonies and rituals. But the family conservatism receives a heavy blow when Shekhar marries a girl from a different community altogether. This marriage shows the effect of an alien culture on an orthodox Hindu family living in Trinidad.

PART ONE, CHAPTER SIX

A DEPARTURE

Plot-Developments

- (1) Mr. Biswas's condition becomes so bad that some of the labourers find it necessary to go and inform the Tulsi family about it. Mrs. Tulsi and Owad (her younger son) are at this time living in Port of Spain, while Shama is at Hanuman house and is about to give birth to her fourth child.
- (2) Chinta says that she has always thought Mr. Biswas to be a madman and that now her belief has been confirmed by the news brought by the labourers.
- (3) Mr. Biswas is carried from Green Vale to Hanuman House by Govind (one of the Tulsi sons-in-law), while Anand goes walking.
- (4) Shama decides that Mr. Biswas must not go back to Green Vale.
- (5) The doctor who is summoned to examine Mr. Biswas says that Mr. Biswas is suffering from nervous debility and from vitamin deficiency, and that all talk about his being mad is foolish.
- (6) Mr. Biswas now begins slowly to recover from his illness. He begins to forget his fears and questionings.
- (7) Mr. Biswas's brothers, Pratap and Prasad, come to inquire about his health. Ramchand, Dehuti's husband, also comes. Ramchand urges Mr. Biswas to go to Port of Spain and try his luck there instead of remaining in a backward place like Arwacas or Green Vale. Ramchand himself is now living in Port of Spain with Dehuti.
- (8) Seth brings the information that the house which Mr. Biswas had built at Green Vale has been burned down by the labourers. Mr. Biswas heaves a sign of relief because he would not have liked to go back to Green Vale in any case.
- (9) Shama gives birth to her fourth child, another daughter.
- (10) Hanuman House now seems to Mr. Biswas to be a living organism having the power to give a sense of comfort to those who live in it. Thus, in the hour of difficulty Mr. Biswas derives much comfort from the place which he has always held in contempt and the inmates of which he has always despised.
- (11) One day Seth tells Mr. Biswas that he must think of doing something. Mr. Biswas, who has been meditating upon his situation of being unemployed and without any means of earning his livelihood, decides to leave Hanuman House.

- (12) The next morning, Mr. Biswas slips out of the house without even seeing Shama and the new baby.

A Change in Mr. Biswas's Attitude to Hanuman House

The change in Mr. Biswas's attitude to Hanuman House is to be noted. On one previous occasion also he had felt that Hanuman House was a kind of haven* where he could get shelter in times of difficulty. Now that feeling returns to him in a much stronger form. It seems to him that Hanuman House is, after all, a place where he can always find a refuge, a place where his children would not starve. Thus Mr. Biswas's attitude to Hanuman House is to be regarded as an ambivalent one. He certainly detests this place because it is a symbol of tyranny and oppression; but at the same time he realizes that in times of difficulty this is the only place where he can find any relief and solace. We too share this feeling with him. When he was overtaken by a serious illness at Green Vale, he was removed to Hanuman House and could not have been taken anywhere else. Of course, Tara and Ajodha too would gladly have given him shelter but there he would have been cut off from his wife and children.

Pathos

Mr. Biswas's anxiety about his financial condition and his lack of employment is described in such a way as to arouse our sympathy for him :

He was the father of four children, and his position was as it had been when he was seventeen, unmarried and ignorant of the Tulsis. He had no vocation, no reliable means of earning a living. The job at Green Vale was over . . . his money dwindled : Ovaltine, Ferrol, Sanatogen ; the doctor's fees, the midwife's, the thaumaturge's. And there was no more money to give.

When he slips out of Hanuman House, he has no idea at all where he would go. The situation is indeed pathetic.

Superstition

Superstition forms an inseparable part of Hindu life in Trinidad as depicted by Naipaul. We have noted the superstitious ideas which were expressed at the time of the birth of Mr. Biswas. Now, when Mr. Biswas lies ill at Hanuman House, a thaumaturge is summoned after a qualified doctor has already examined him and given his opinion. The thaumaturge purifies the room in which Mr. Biswas lies, and erects invisible barriers against evil spirits. He recommends that strips of aloe should be hung in doorways and windows, and says that the family should have stuck a black doll in the doorway of the hall to prevent the entry of evil spirits. Then he offers to

*Haven—a place of refuge or shelter. (To be distinguished from heaven).

prepare a medicine to be given to the patient, but this offer is rejected by Seth. Thus we have here a mixture of superstition and enlightenment. (A thaumaturge is a man who is believed to be capable of working wonders or miracles).

PART TWO, CHAPTER ONE

AMAZING SCENES

Plot-Developments

- (1) After leaving Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas does not know where he would go. He thinks of going to Port of Spain where Ramchand and Dehuti live and whither Ramchand had advised him to go and try his luck.
- (2) A bus picks up Mr. Biswas at the road junction where he stood undecided. The bus is bound for Port of Spain.
- (3) On arriving in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas makes inquiries regarding the address which Ramchand had given him, and manages to reach his destination where he is cordially received by both his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand.
- (4) Dehuti and Ramchand have two rooms, one of which is now given to Mr. Biswas.
- (5) At the end of a fortnight Mr. Biswas finds that he has spent whatever little money he had got with him. Besides, he begins to feel burdened by his freedom and his idleness.
- (6) Then one day Mr. Biswas is once again haunted by his old fears. He goes to consult the specialist whose name had been given to him by the doctor at Arwacas. However, he returns without consulting the specialist.
- (7) While passing through a street where a number of newspaper offices are situated, Mr. Biswas thinks of looking for a job there. He meets the editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel* and gets a job as a sign-painter.
- (8) Mr. Biswas's mind is often haunted by the headlines of a news-item which he had read on a newspaper-sheet at Green Vale. The opening words of the headlines were : "Amazing Scenes Were Witnessed Yesterday When Passers-By Stopped And Stared"
- (9) From a sign-painter, Mr. Biswas is now promoted to the post of a newspaper-reporter. The editor, Mr. Burnett, wants him to write some report which would shock the readers. Accordingly, Mr. Biswas writes a report with the following heading : "Daddy Comes Home In A Coffin : U.S. Explorer's Last Journey On Ice." This shocking story is liked by Mr. Burnett and it brings to Mr. Biswas a certain notoriety.

- (10) Soon after the publication of this story, Mr. Biswas goes to Arwacas to meet his family at Hanuman House.
- (11) Mrs. Tulsi, who has herself been living in Port of Spain with her younger son Owad, now suggests that Mr. Biswas should bring his family to Port of Spain and live with her and Owad in a house which she had purchased.
- (12) Mr. Biswas brings his family to Port of Spain and begins to live in Mrs. Tulsi's house. His relations with Mrs. Tulsi and with Owad now improve to a considerable extent.
- (13) Mr. Biswas begins to write articles for magazines, but none of his articles is accepted for publication. He tries to write stories but fails in this enterprise also. He is at this time thirty-three years of age and is the father of four children.
- (14) During the holidays, Mr. Biswas's children go to Hanuman House for brief visits. Then they start going to meet Tara and Ajodha who are still living in Pagotes and who had built a new house for themselves. Ajodha is still interested in the newspaper-column called "That Body of Yours".
- (15) Owad is now going to England in order to pursue medical studies. All the relatives of the Tulsi family come to Port of Spain in order to bid him farewell.
- (16) In the course of an outing with Mr. Biswas, Owad, and Shekhar, the boy Anand is nearly drowned. Afterwards Anand writes a brilliant account of this terrible experience. It is then decided that Anand should study hard and compete for a scholarship to enable him to pursue his studies at college.
- (17) Owad sails away to England.

A Miscellany of Events in This Chapter

With the end of Part I of the novel, the account of Mr. Biswas's life in the Trinidad countryside comes to an end. Mr. Biswas now moves to the capital city of Port of Spain, and Part II of the novel deals largely with his life there. This particular Chapter contains a miscellany of facts and incidents. There are quite a large number of incidents and episodes some of which have no connection with one another. For instance, the episode of Anand's near-drowning serves no purpose at all so far as the main plot of the novel is concerned. Perhaps this episode was intended by the author to lead to the discovery that Anand had talent enough to be prepared for the exhibition examination to compete for a scholarship. It is only as a result of his experience of his near-drowning that he writes an account which is regarded as brilliant and which brings him twelve out of ten marks from the teacher. Then there is the episode of the arrival of all the kinsfolk of Mrs. Tulsi at her house in Port of Spain to bid farewell to Owad. This

episode too does not have any intimate relationship with the main plot. Here the author's aim seems to have been to give us a picture of how these visitors from the countryside behave in the capital city and on board the ship by which Owad is to sail.

The Impact of an Alien Culture

It may be noted also that some of the relations of Mrs. Tulsi do not approve of Owad's sailing across the waters to go to a foreign country, because they still have a prejudice against foreign travel. Mrs. Tulsi, who herself is an orthodox kind of woman, has come under the influence of the alien western culture and therefore sees no harm in her son's going abroad. Owad's going abroad, like Shekhar's marriage to a westernized Christian wife, is important in showing the impact of the alien western culture on the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi (household. Mrs. Tulsi has by now become a strange blend of orthodoxy and modernity.

The Loose Structure of the Novel

This Chapter may be regarded as an illustration of the looseness of the structure of the novel as a whole. Incident follows incident in this Chapter, and detail is piled on detail. There is no connection between one incident and another. In fact, this remark applies to most of the other chapters of the novel also. Although the novel is brilliant in many ways, it does suffer from the structural fault of looseness. In this respect, as in the mingling of comedy and pathos, this novel reminds us of the novels of Charles Dickens.

The Father-Son Relationship

An important point about this Chapter is that it marks a development in the relationship of Mr. Biswas and his son Anand. From the very beginning Mr. Biswas has been taking a keen interest in his son's upbringing. The relationship between them had become close when Mr. Biswas had taken the boy to stay with him for some time at Green Vale where Mr. Biswas had subsequently fallen ill. In the present Chapter, that relationship develops a stage further. Although Mr. Biswas finds it necessary to flog the boy on one occasion, yet he also feels pleased with the discovery that the boy has a certain literary talent. Mr. Biswas therefore takes steps to see that Anand prepares for a competitive examination, though Anand himself is somewhat averse to working hard. The father-son relationship in one of the major themes of this novel.

Mr. Biswas's Continuing Dependence On Mrs. Tulsi

So far as Mr. Biswas himself is concerned, it is noteworthy that, despite his efforts to liberate himself from the hold of the Tulsis, he finds himself once again in their grip. In the beginning he had lived in their house at Arwacas; then he had lived in their house at The Chase; then he had lived in the barracks which also

belonged to them, though he had also built a house of his own without being able to complete it. Subsequently, he had lived for some time with his sister Dehuti. And now once again he finds himself living in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Thus his dependence upon Mrs. Tulsi has continued despite his rebelliousness, his defiant gestures, and his disparaging and almost insulting comments on the Tulsi family. During his stay in Mrs. Tulsi house in Port of Spain, however, his hostility to the Tulsi family diminishes considerably.

Mr. Biswas's Failure As a Writer

Apart from Mr. Biswas's failure to have achieved independence so far as living accommodation is concerned, his efforts to establish himself as a literary writer have also failed. Although, he has taken correspondence lessons in writing articles none of his articles is accepted for publication. As a writer of short stories he fails miserably because he is never able to go beyond the opening sentence. He had even purchased a second-hand typewriter to write his articles and stories, but this purchase has involved only a needless expense without having brought him any return. At best he remains a newspaper-reporter, capable of writing exciting reports, some authentic and some imaginary.

PART TWO, CHAPTER TWO

THE NEW REGIME

Plot-Developments

- (1) As Owad has left Trinidad, Mrs. Tulsi sees no point in continuing to stay in Port of Spain. She therefore returns to Hanuman House at Arwacas, where she begins to spend much of her time in the Rose Room, grieving for Owad.
- (2) A rift begins to take place between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. It is reported that Seth is trying to buy some property exclusively for himself.
- (3) Shekhar comes with his wife to meet his mother at Hanuman House during the Christmas week. Shekhar's wife, being a Christian and a woman with modern ideas, becomes a target of criticism by all the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi, though their criticism is futile.
- (4) In Port of Spain Mr. Biswas is told by his editor, Mr. Burnett, that he (Mr. Burnett) might be sacked by the newspaper management.
- (5) Mr. Burnett is actually sacked, and he leaves Trinidad. The new editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel* introduces many changes of policy. These changes include certain rigid conditions to be observed by the correspondents and reporters in the employ of this newspaper. Everyday some new directive is issued to

govern the conduct of the newspaper reporters. Mr. Biswas feels very upset by the new directives which allow no scope to a reporter to function independently.

- (6) Mr. Biswas's duty under the new editor is to write articles in praise of the public institutions. Mr. Biswas finds this work irksome, and he now lives in constant fear of dismissal.
- (7) Prices have gone up considerably on account of the war. The increase in Mr. Biswas's salary has not kept pace with the increase in prices so that he feels even more discontented than ever.
- (8) On a Saturday Mr. Biswas takes his children to Tara's house at Pagotes. The children enjoy their visit and start going there every week-end.
- (9) One afternoon when Mr. Biswas returns from his office, he finds that the rose-garden which he had planted on one side of the house, has been destroyed and the ground levelled. He becomes furious.
- (10) Seth, needing parking-space for his lorries, had ordered the levelling of the ground, which involved the destruction of the rose-garden.
- (11) Seth speaks tauntingly about Mr. Biswas's angry reaction to the levelling of the ground. Seth tells Mr. Biswas's children that Mr. Biswas has forgotten the time when he had come to Hanuman House as a poor fellow having neither money nor property. Mr. Biswas is feeling so angry at this time that he begins to break the things in his room.

A Threat to the Family Unity

There are now signs that Mrs. Tulsi's grip over Hanuman House and its inmates is loosening. Her influence is beginning to be felt more and more as only that of an irritable invalid. With her two sons settled, she appears to have lost interest in the family. She spends much of her time in her own room known as the Rose Room, producing an impression that she is constantly ill. The rift between her and Seth does not bode well for the Tulsi family. In fact, this rift indicates that the Tulsi family is heading for a disintegration.

Shekhar's Wife, a Target of Criticism By Shekhar's Sisters

Dorothy, the wife of Shekhar, becomes a natural target of criticism by Shekhar's sisters. The criticism by a man's sisters of his wife is a common feature of the Hindu joint family life; but in this particular case the criticism is harsher because of the fact that the wife belongs to a different religion and holds unorthodox ideas. Dorothy herself is not a passive kind of woman. She had from the

beginning met the patronizing attitude of the Tulsis with an arrogant Presbyterian modernity. She wears short frocks and does not care if people think that she looks indecent. Shekhar's sisters find much to criticize in Dorothy. Dorothy, like all westerners, uses her right hand for unclean purposes; her sexual appetite seems to be enormous; her daughters seem to have the appearance of whores. (Shekhar and Dorothy already have five children at this time, all of them daughters). Shekhar's sisters feel a certain sympathy for Shekhar who, instead of having gone for higher studies to Cambridge University in England, had in their opinion been married to a shameless wife.

Shama's Isolated Existence

Shama's mode of life undergoes a certain change during the period covered by this Chapter. She still cannot come to terms with her husband over his relationship with Tara and Ajodha. Her visit to Tara's house in the company of her children proves a failure and she never repeats this visit. The result is that she finds herself alone in the house in Port of Spain when the children go on their weekly visits to Tara's house. Nor does she go as often to Hanuman House as she used to before, because the growing rift between Mrs. Tulsy and Seth has made Hanuman House an uncongenial place.

Anand, Playing the Truant

Anand has begun to play the truant at school. He is averse to working hard for his exhibition examination. In order to stay away from school he pretends to have developed a liking for the Hindu religious rituals. He gets his head shaved, ostensibly to be able to conduct a brahminical ceremony; but his real motive in doing so is to avoid going to school because no boy with a shaved head would go to a predominantly Christian school.

Mr. Biswas, Fed Up With His Job

Mr. Biswas continues to be a dissatisfied and unhappy man. He might have made some progress in his journalistic career if Mr. Burnett had continued to be the editor; but, with the change of editors, and with the initiation of new policies by the management, Mr. Biswas begins to feel miserable. He feels like resigning his job, but he knows that he would be hard put to it to find another. He makes gestures of defiance, but he knows that these are futile. For instance, he sometimes says to Shama: "Let them sack me. Let them sack me like hell. Think I care! I want them to sack me!" But Shama would merely mock at him for making these remarks which she knows he does not mean. Referring to the directive which says: "Report not distort", Mr. Biswas makes the following comment on the new editor who has issued this directive: "That is all the son of

that everybody on the staff of this newspaper is thinking of leaving because reporters and correspondents are not going to tolerate this sort of treatment. In this state of discontent, Mr. Biswas draws comfort from the novels of Dickens. When, under the orders of Seth, Mr. Biswas's rose-garden is destroyed and the ground is levelled, Mr. Biswas feels so upset that he begins to break all sorts of things in his room. He now comes to know that the lorries which Seth wants to park on that piece of ground belong exclusively to Seth. Up to now all the property such as the land at Green Vale, the shop at The Chase, and the house at Arwacas, belonged simply to the Tulsis and to the House as a whole. Now a division seems to be taking place as a consequence of the rift that has occurred between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth.

Seth's Sarcastic Remarks About Mr. Biswas

Seth once again gives evidence of his sense of humour when he makes certain sarcastic remarks about Mr. Biswas. When Mr. Biswas reacts angrily against the destruction of his rose-garden, Seth tells Mr. Biswas's children that Mr. Biswas is a damned funny sort of man because he is behaving as if he were the owner of the place. Seth says that it was he who had picked up Mr. Biswas and got him married to Shama, and that in those days Mr. Biswas was not even catching crabs, but that the fellow was just catching flies in those days. Seth tells the children that, when they were born, their father was not in a position even to feed them. Of course, much of what Seth says here is true.

PART TWO, CHAPTER THREE

THE SHORTHILLS ADVENTURE

Plot-Developments

- (1) The Tulsis decide to shift from Arwacas to the their estate at Shorthills to the north-east of Port of Spain, among the mountains of the northern range.
- (2) A state of war now exists between Seth and the rest of the Tulsi family. Seth, his wife, and his children have already left Hanuman House and are living in a back street not far away.
- (3) Nobody knows why such a vital decision, namely the move from Arwacas to Shorthills, has been taken. To Mr. Biswas this decision seems to be a crazy one.
- (4) After having shifted to Shorthills, Mrs. Tulsi suggests to Mr. Biswas that he and his family should also join them all at Shorthills. She says that he would be given free accommodation in her house there. Mr. Biswas accepts the offer and he

too settles at Shorthills with his family. He regards his residence at Shorthills as an insurance against the possibility of his being dismissed by the *Trinidad Sentinel*.

- (5) One day seven marriages take place simultaneously at Shorthills. Seven nieces of Shama are married off on this occasion.
- (6) After some time, two of the Tulsi sons-in-law begin to cut down the trees on the Tulsi estate in order to sell the wood and make a private profit. One son-in-law, called W.C. Tuttle, cuts down the palm trees, while Govind, another son-in-law, cuts down some of the orange trees. Furthermore, W.C. Tuttle begins to sell cedar trees from the estate, while Govind begins to sell privately lorry-loads of oranges, pears, limes, and grapefruit from the Tulsi estate.
- (7) Many of the Tulsi children are now going to schools in Port of Spain. The problem of their being transported to the city is a very difficult one. The children have to get up very early in the morning and they return very late in the evening.
- (8) A number of deaths occur in quick succession. One of the sons-in-law, by the name of Mr. Sharma, dies after falling down from a tree. A week later Hari, another son-in-law, dies. About a fortnight later news comes from Arwacas that Seth's wife Padma has died. Some of the women-folk at Shorthills say that Padma has been poisoned by Seth.
- (9) Govind who had so far been looking after the cows now gives up that duty. He buys a car and drives it as a taxi. W.C. Tuttle buys a lorry which he begins to drive for commercial transport.
- (10) Feeling fed up with the noise and the crowd in the house, Mr. Biswas chooses a suitable site on the Tulsi estate at Shorthills to build a house of his own. Mr. Biswas then shifts with his family to the new house which he has built.
- (11) Mr. Biswas too makes some private profit by stealthily plucking oranges and pears from the Tulsi trees and selling them to a shopkeeper in Port of Spain.
- (12) Mr. Biswas's new house catches fire and is partially destroyed. He again takes shelter in Mrs Tulsi's house.

Another Step Towards the Disintegration of the Tulsi Family

The widening of the rift between Seth and Mrs. Tulsi marks another step forward in the disintegration of the Tulsi family. The solidarity of the Tulsi family has given way to a division. Seth has defected from the family in order to pursue his own interests. But he is not the only defector. Govind and W.C. Tuttle have also inwardly broken away from the Tulsi family and have begun to make private profits by selling trees from the Tulsi estate. It becomes known to

the whole family that Govind and W.C. Tuttle are making private profits, but nobody can do anything about it because Mrs. Tulsi's authority has greatly been weakened by Seth's defection. Mr. Biswas finds that the law of the jungle now prevails in the Tulsi household and that every son-in-law lives for himself and for his own wife and children. Mr. Biswas himself is no exception to this kind of selfishness and greed. He steals oranges from the Tulsi estate, carries them on his bicycle to Port of Spain, and sells them to a shopkeeper to whom he says that he has brought the fruit from the trees growing in the backyard of his house. Thus even Mr. Biswas is not above this kind of theft and dishonesty. The author in this connection writes : "He (Mr. Biswas) continued to plunder, enjoying the feeling that in the midst of chaos he was calmly going about his own devilish plans." The author further writes that the news of the damage being done to the Tulsi estate by W.C. Tuttle and Govind was whispered through the house. Govind and his wife Chinta ignore these whispers, while W.C. Tuttle replies to the whispers by frowning and by taking exercise with his dumb-bells. The nine little Tuttles stop speaking to the other children as a protest against those whispers, while their mother looks offended. (W.C. Tuttle has as many as nine children. The Tulsi daughters and sons-in-law are really prolific.*)

A Man Called W.C. Tuttle

W.C. Tuttle and his family are mentioned here for the first time in this novel. W.C. Tuttle is one of the Tulsi sons-in-law and, as indicated above, has as many as nine children. W.C. Tuttle is a man owning a large collection of books, a man who takes physical exercise with dumb-bells, a man who is also utterly unscrupulous. He not only sells cedar trees from the Tulsi estate but also opens a quarry** on the estate thus arousing everybody's envy.

Mr. Biswas's Desire to Own a House, Again Frustrated

Mr. Biswas's building a house at Shorthills is a very important development in the story. Previously he had built a house at Green Vale, but that house had remained incomplete and had ultimately been burned down by the local labourers who had been feeling hostile towards both Seth and Mr. Biswas. Now Mr. Biswas builds another house, and this one too is burned down, though this time the fire is partly a result of his own indiscretion and partly an accident. The destruction of this house by a fire again leaves Mr. Biswas a homeless man. He has desperately been wanting to have a house of his own, but he is being thwarted in this desire for the second time by circumstances beyond his control.

Humour

There is plenty of humour in this Chapter as in many other Chapters of the novel. Mr. Biswas has many sarcastic remarks to

*Prolific—those who produce many children.

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**Quarry—a place from where stone is excavated for construction purposes.

make about Shorthills where Mrs. Tulsi has settled down after leaving Hanuman House at Arwacas. Mrs. Tulsi had made it known that every member of the family would be given a sheep at Shorthills, and she had created an impression that there were horses on the estate and that the children would learn to ride. But subsequently it is found that there are no horses on the Tulsi estate at all. Nor is there any sign of the sheep. Mr. Biswas thus gets an opportunity to make fun of Shama and her family, and he tells Shama that he cannot understand the madness which has overtaken her family who left Arwacas to settle at this far-off place. Seeing many bamboo trees on the estate, he mockingly says to Mrs. Tulsi : "A lot of bamboo. You could start a paper factory." Seeing a mule on the estate, Mr. Biswas mockingly says : "Horses." Towards the end of the Chapter, when a fire has destroyed his house, Mr. Biswas says that, if anybody wants charcoal, plenty of it is available at his charred house, adding that the ashes from the burnt house can be collected and used as a kind of fertilizer. Thus, even in the midst of his misfortune, Mr. Biswas does not lose his sense of humour. It is amusing also to find Mr. Biswas stealing oranges from the Tulsi estate in order to sell them to a shop in the city. He tells the shop-keeper in Port of Spain that he has got these oranges from his own trees growing in the backyard of his house. In this context the author writes : "Cycling to work in the cool of the morning and whistling in his way, he (Mr. Biswas) would suddenly jump off his bicycle, look right, look left, pull down oranges or pears, drop them into his saddle-bag, hop on to his saddle and cycle measuredly away, whistling." The account of the seven marriages which takes place on the same day also provides much humour : "The seven bridegrooms came in seven cavalcades with seven teams of drummers.....When the weddings were over, the population of the house temporarily reduced by seven, the guests gone away, everyone began waiting again for the ruined garden to be replanted." Another amusing passage in this Chapter is the one which contains an account of the frequent breakdowns of the car, a Ford V-8, and the children having to push the car in which they were being transported to Port of Spain. Then there is a humorous anti-climax to the account of the several deaths which take place in quick succession. After describing the deaths of Mr. Sharma, Hari, and Padma, the author writes : "And two of the sheep died."

The Character of Hari, One of the Tulsi Sons-in-law

Hari's character is further developed in this Chapter. Hari, we are told, was one of those men who are thought of kindly by every one. He had taken part in no disputes; his goodness, like his scholarship, was a family tradition. Everyone had been used to seeing Hari as the officiating pundit at religious ceremonies; everyone had been used to receiving the holy food from him every morning. Hari, in *dhoti*; his forehead marked with sandalwood paste; Hari doing

morning and evening puja; Hari with religious texts on the elaborately carved book-rest: these had been regular sights in the Tulsi house. There was no one to take Hari's place.

PART TWO, CHAPTER FOUR

AMONG THE READERS AND LEARNERS

Plot-Developments

- (1) Mr. Biswas's burnt house is now put up for sale, while Mr. Biswas and his family shift to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain where they are given two rooms.
- (2) Mr. Biswas and his family are not the only ones to move from Shorthills to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. The Tuttles also go; and so do Govind, Chinta, and their children. A widow by the name of Basdai also goes thither.
- (3) With such a large crowd in this house, there is no peace for Mr. Biswas.
- (4) Basdai, the widow, adds to the crowding in the house by taking in boarders and lodgers from Shorthills.
- (5) On account of the insanitary conditions prevailing in the house, Mr. Biswas's children begin to suffer from various ailments.
- (6) A change is now made by the newspaper management in Mr. Biswas's duties. He is appointed an investigator to select deserving destitutes to be given financial help from a new Fund which has been established by that newspaper. Mr. Biswas finds his new work to be very tedious and even risky.
- (7) One Sunday Mr. Biswas takes his children to Pagotes to meet Jagdat (one of the two sons of Bhandat) who has been living in the house of Tara and Ajodha. Jagdat has now been adopted by Ajodha as his heir, and he is fully exploiting Ajodha.
- (8) The relations between Govind and his wife Chinta are no longer cordial. Govind now starts beating Chinta, and this fact becomes known to everybody in the house. A mutual hostility now begins between Mr. Biswas's son Anand and Govind's son Vidiadhar. Both the boys belong to the exhibition class at school and both are to appear in the competitive examination in an effort to win scholarships for higher studies.
- (9) One day Mr. Biswas takes his son Anand with him to a cinema to see a film. But Mr. Biswas does not have enough money to buy two full tickets, with the result that both father and son return without seeing the picture.

- (10) Anand and Vidiadhar appear in the exhibition examination. Anand tells his parents that he has not done well in the examination and has made a mess of the whole thing. Vidiadhar, on the contrary, declares that he has done very well and is sure to win a scholarship.
- (11) One day Mr. Biswas receives a letter inviting him to attend a meeting of a newly-formed literary group. Mr. Biswas goes but finds that he is not quite up to the mark.
- (12) Mr. Biswas's mother, Bipti, dies. Mr. Biswas and Shama go to attend the funeral which is also attended by Mr. Biswas's brothers, sister, and brother-in-law (Ram Chand).
- (13) Mr. Biswas writes an angry letter to Dr. Rameshwar who had been very rude to Pratap and Prasad when they had gone to the doctor to obtain Bipti's death certificate.
- (14) The results of the exhibition examination are declared. Anand stands third in the list of the scholarship-winners. Vidiadhar's name does not appear even in the list of those candidates who have simply passed the examination.
- (14) Mr. Biswas receives a letter of regret from Dr. Rameshwar.

A Vivid Picture of Social and Domestic Life

The scene now shifts once again to Port of Spain, and we are given a vivid picture of the social and domestic life of the Tulsis in this capital city. Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain now becomes crowded because several members of the Tulsi clan have moved from Shorthills to the city, mainly in the interest of the education of their children. The crowding in the house becomes a cause of much annoyance to Mr. Biswas. The house is never quiet, we are told. The noise becomes almost unbearable when one of the Tulsi sons-in-law, namely W.C. Tuttle, buys a gramophone and plays one record over and over again, with W.C. Tuttle himself joining in when the refrain of the song is sung. Then there are quarrels in the family. A dispute arises between W.C. Tuttle and Govind, because they both park their vehicles in the garage at the side of the house, so that in the mornings one of them is always in the way of the other. But this dispute, between them goes on without either of them speaking to the other; the dispute, in fact, takes place between their wives. W.C. Tuttle tells his wife that her brother-in-law (meaning Govind) is an illiterate man; while Govind also vents* his wrath upon his own wife (Chinta). Besides, the several sisters have daily squabbles of their own, as to whose children have dirtied the washed clothes, and whose children have left the toilet filthy. With Mrs. Tulsi continuing to live at Shorthills, there is no discipline at all in the house here. Another point to be noted about the life of this family is that we

*Vents—gives an outlet to; gives vent to.

now find among them a mixture of orthodoxy and modernity. W.C. Tuttle is a strict *brahmin* but at the same time he is a believer in modern ways. In addition to the gramophone, he possesses also a radio, and a number of dainty tables ; and he creates a sensation when he buys a four-foot high statue of a naked woman holding a torch. The desire of the women-folk to have their children educated in good schools in the city is another aspect of modernity. The education frenzy has spread even to Mrs. Tulsi's friends and dependants still living at Arwacas. They all want their children to go to the schools in Port of Spain ; and Mrs. Tulsi has to accept their plea out of her sense of duty to them. The widow Basdai willingly accepts these additional children as boarders and lodgers. The cries of "read" and "learn" increase in the house. Mr. Biswas feels dissatisfied not only because of all this noise but also because of the insanitary conditions prevailing in the house. He says that, if the sanitary inspector pays just one visit to this place, every body would be sent to jail. To add to his dissatisfaction, his children begin to suffer from various ailments. Savi suffers from a skin rash ; and Anand suddenly develops asthma. Mr. Biswas's own indigestion becomes much worse. Yet another noteworthy point about the family is the increasing prosperity of some of the sons-in-law like Govind and W.C. Tuttle. Govind is doing a good job as a taxi-driver, with the Americans as his passengers. W.C. Tuttle too is making good money by hiring out his lorry to the Americans. Govind now owns new six suits of clothes ; and there is some talk of his son Vidiadhar being sent abroad for a professional education. Mr. Biswas feels envious of both these men. His feeling of frustration in life deepens because he does not visualize a bright future for his son Anand. Anand might get a job in the customs or a clerkship in the social service, he thinks. As for Mr. Biswas himself, he knows that he can never leave the *Trinidad Sentinel* to work for the Americans because he lacks the necessary aptitude to work for them.

Character-Portrayal

Mr. Biswas's new duties further add to his annoyance. He has been appointed an investigator to scrutinize the applications of desututes for financial help. Day after day he has to interview the mutilated ones, the insane ones, and the paupers. Sometimes he is threatened with violence ; sometimes he is accosted by burly Negroes demanding money from him. On one occasion he is insulted by a prostitute. As his relations with Govind are not quite friendly, and as Govind often insults Shama and Mr. Biswas's children, Mr. Biswas tries to make an ally of W.C. Tuttle whose physical strength matches that of Govind. Mr. Biswas and W.C. Tuttle have something in common : they both feel that by marrying into the Tulsi family they have fallen among barbarians. But an understanding between Mr. Biswas and W.C. Tuttle does not take the form of intimacy. In fact, a rivalry begins between them. W.C. Tuttle takes

out a life-insurance policy, while Mr. Biswas, with his limited income, cannot do so. Then a picture-war begins between the two. Mr. Biswas buys some drawings from a bookshop and has them framed, while W.C. Tuttle gets photographs of himself and his family framed in order to hang them upon the walls in his room. When Mr. Biswas is invited to attend a meeting of a newly-formed literary group, he finds himself to be out of place because he cannot really equal the literary achievement of the members of this group. He fails also as a writer of short stories. These failures deepen his frustration in life. Then comes the news of the death of his mother Bipti. Although there had not been much understanding between him and his mother, he now feels oppressed by a sense of loss : not of present loss but of something missed in the past. He goes to take part in the mourning, taking his family along with him. Shama, as Bipti's daughter-in-law, does her duty and weeps at the funeral. For several days after the funeral Mr. Biswas feels depressed. On being told by his brothers Pratap and Prasad that Dr. Rameshwar, who had attended upon Bipti before her death, had been very rude to them when they had asked him for Bipti's death certificate, Mr. Biswas writes a letter to Dr. Rameshwar complaining about the doctor's rudeness to his brothers and scolding him for his unprofessional conduct. Mr. Biswas also writes a poem addressed to his dead mother and reads out the poem at a meeting of the literary group, though it does not produce much effect on the listeners. In the midst of all his frustrations and disappointments, something happens to cheer him up. When the results of the exhibition examination are declared, Anand is found to have won a scholarship, and to have stood third in the list of successful candidates. (The first place has gone to a Negro boy.) Anand receives a gift from the Tuttles on his brilliant result, though Mr. Biswas himself is unable to keep his promise of presenting a bicycle to Anand. In this context, the author also makes a reference to the World War which has been going on and which has led to a rise in prices and a scarcity of flour and other commodities.

Bhandat's Wretchedness

This Chapter contains also a picture of the kind of life that Bhandat (Ajodha's brother) is leading. One day Mr. Biswas, in his capacity as an investigator into the cases of destitutes, receives a letter from Bhandat. In response to this letter Mr. Biswas visits Bhandat at the address which Bhandat had specified. Mr. Biswas finds Bhandat leading a sordid life in a slum area. Bhandat is living with his Chinese mistress in straitened circumstances. He is competing for a prize which has been offered to the writer of the best slogan in praise of the Lux Toilet Soap. Bhandat's Chinese mistress is a middle-aged woman, very thin, with a long neck and a small face. Bhandat attitude towards his mistress is haughty rather than affectionate. His mistress appears to Mr. Biswas to be a timid woman.

Ajodha, Tara, and Ajodha's Nephews

During this period Mr. Biswas pays a visit to Ajodha's house as well. As we know, Ajodha's nephews, Jagdat and Rabidat, are also living in Ajodha's house. Between Jagdat and Mr. Biswas there has developed an easy relationship. They can never become friends, but each feels pleased to meet the other. Jagdat has been adopted by Ajodha as his heir, because Tara had failed to give birth to a child of her own. Jagdat is fully exploiting Ajodha. He has an arrangement with the owner of a local rum-shop from where he gets free rum in return for free petrol which he gives to that man from Ajodha's petrol-pump. Whenever Mr. Biswas visits Ajodha's house, Jagdat entertains him with whisky. Jagdat speaks to Mr. Biswas disparagingly about Ajodha, criticizing Ajodha for what he calls Ajodha's selfishness and cruelty. Jagdat goes so far as to describe Ajodha as "that blood-sucking hog." Mr. Biswas begins to visit Ajodha's house (at Pagotes) quite often in order to meet Jagdat and, whenever they meet, they both get drunk. Mr. Biswas gets opportunities of talking to Ajodha as well on these visits, and Ajodha speaks to him about his business problems. Ajodha complains that the Local Road Board has not given him the contract which he wanted and that he is not also getting a permit to import diesel lorries. Ajodha wants Mr. Biswas, who is attached to a newspaper, to write an article criticizing the authorities for not sanctioning Ajodha's applications. As a result of his heavy drinking, Mr. Biswas has to consume more of Maclean's Stomach Powder. Tara always welcomes Mr. Biswas and his children whenever they pay a visit, though she is herself now afflicted by asthma. Tara tells Mr. Biswas that Ajodha is very attached to his nephews and that they are also attached to him (though she is mistaken in her latter belief). Both Jagdat and Rabidat have a large brood of illegitimate children but, having neither money nor any natural abilities, they have no alternative but to remain tied to Ajodha who is a well-to-do man.

Govind and Chinta

As has already been pointed out, Govind is now a taxi-driver and has made a lot of money. He owns five or six suits of clothes and has become even more aggressive than he used to be. He often insults Shama and her children, and Mr. Biswas feels helpless. Govind's wife Chinta has told her children how Govind had once thrashed Mr. Biswas; and her children have passed on the story to all the boarders and lodgers of Basdai. Govind and Chinta are not getting on very well with the Tuttles. In order to counter the gramophone noises for which W.C Tuttle is responsible, Chinta and Govind have been singing songs from the *Ramayana* in loud voices and with great zest. But there is another development also. Govind has now started beating Chinta. Chinta, however, accepts these beatings without a protest. In fact, she thinks that these beatings have added to her dignity and brought her more respect.

Humour

There is plenty of humour in the narration in this Chapter'. Mr. Biswas's encounter with a prostitute in the course of his professional rounds is an amusing one. He questions the prostitute, not knowing that she is a prostitute, in order to find out if she is a destitute ; but, when he is leaving, she asks him for money on the plea that he had come to her as a customer and that he must pay her for the service she has rendered to him. "Where my money ?" she asks him and then follows him to the door shouting that he had made love to her behind the curtain and that he is now refusing to pay her. Another amusing passage is the one in which we are told that Mr. Biswas was offered bribes by those who wanted financial help from the Destitutes' Fund. To be offered bribes was regarded as a mark of status, says the author. Mr. Biswas does not accept bribes, though he does allow a Negro carpenter to make him a dining-table at a reduced cost. Then the account of the rivalry between the Tuttles and Govind-Chinta, as also the rivalry between the Tuttles and Mr. Biswas provide considerable amusement to us. The episode of Mr. Biswas and his son Anand going to the cinema, without having enough money to buy two full tickets, is amusing also. But, perhaps, the most amusing episode in this Chapter is the one relating to the fate of Govind's son Vidiadhar in the exhibition examination. Anand had given out that he had done badly in the examination ; but he stands third in the list of the successful candidates. Vidiadhar, on the contrary, had told everybody that he was sure to win a scholarship but his name does not appear even in the list of those who have barely managed to get through. Chinta is furious with her son at his failure in the examination. She administers a flogging to him and says that she would cut his tongue with a knife. She then warns him that he would get nothing from her in future except bread and water. Her harsh treatment of her son, she says, is the only thing which will satisfy and please her enemies in this house. Chinta keeps shouting her threats to Vidiadhar all day and all evening after the declaration of the results.

Minute, Realistic, and Sordid Details

Naipaul's tendency to dwell on minute but realistic details becomes apparent in this Chapter also. Most of the details which he describes are of a sordid nature. For instance, while describing Mr. Biswas's visits to those areas where destitutes live, he gives us certain details which remind us of similar details given by Charles Dickens in his novels. Day after day Mr. Biswas visits the eastern sections of the city where the houses are narrow and where these houses hide the horrors which lie behind them : the back-yards coated with green slime ; the tall rubble-stone fences against which additional sheds had been built ; yards choked with flimsy cooking sheds ; crowded fowl-coops of wire-netting ; smell upon smell, but none overcoming the stench of cess-pits and overloaded septic tanks ; horror increased by the litters of children, most of them illegitimate, with navels

projecting inches out of their bellies. A detailed description is given to us also of the slum visited by Mr. Biswas in order to meet his uncle, Bhandat. Here Mr. Biswas receives the rancid smell of copra and the heavy smell of sacked sugar ; the many-scented smell of pungent spices ; the smell of dust, straw, the urine and droppings of horses, donkeys, and mules. At every impediment the gutters here have developed a film of scum with a piercing, acrid smell which, heated by the afternoon sun, rises suffocatingly from the road. Bhandat lives in a low, windowless room lit only by the light from the passage. A folding screen shuts off one corner. In another corner there is a bed. The distempered ceilings and walls are coated with dust and soot. On the gritty concrete floor there is a huge pile of newspapers. Next to the screen there is a small table with more Newspapers. The bath-room is roofless.

PART TWO, CHAPTER FIVE

THE VOID

Plot-Developments

- (1) Anand is now attending college. Mr. Biswas evinces much interest in his son's education. A change once again comes over Mr. Biswas. The city of Port of Spain seems to have lost its romance and promise for him. His career seems closed to him. His dreams of the future relate only to Anand.
- (2) Mr Biswas now sinks into a state of despair. It is like sinking into the void which has always represented to him the life he has yet to live. Night after night he feels more and more dejected. He takes less and less interest in investigating the cases of the destitutes. Suddenly one day, Mr. Biswas feels revitalized. He is offered a government job as a Community Welfare Officer at a higher salary than he is getting from the *Trinidad Sentinel*. He accepts the job. His boss is a woman by the name of Miss Logie.
- (3) A few days after his having got this appointment, Miss Logie takes him and his whole family for an excursion to a sea-resort called Sans Souci.
- (4) Mr. Biswas now buys a few new suits for himself. Wearing one of his new suits, he goes to witness an inter-colonial cricket match, carrying a tin of cigarettes and a box of matches in one hand, as is the fashion.
- (5) Soon he is disillusioned with his new job which he finds to be very irksome.
- (6) However, he feels consoled when his department informs him that he can buy a car with a government loan on which he would be charged a nominal interest. On a Saturday morning,

he drives to his house in a brand new Prefect car and parks it before the gate. The car seems to Govind to be so small that he calls it a match-box.

- (7) Mr. Biswas takes his children on a visit to Ajodha and Tara. Ajodha too makes fun of the car which he finds to be a very light vehicle.
- (8) W.C. Tuttle buys a house in Woodbrook and shifts with his family from Mrs. Tulsi's house to the one he has bought.
- (9) Mrs. Tulsi herself now shifts from Shorthills to her house in Port of Spain and occupies the two rooms which have been vacated by W.C. Tuttle and his family.
- (10) Shekhar and his family now start visiting Mrs. Tulsi at her house in Port of Spain.
- (11) Mrs. Tulsi's younger son, Owad, is returning from England. Mrs. Tulsi asks Mr. Biswas to vacate the accommodation which he is occupying so that the house can be renovated to receive Owad.
- (12) Renovations take nearly three months which Mr. Biswas and his family have to spend in a humble tenement nearby. Afterwards they all return to the renovated house, though they are given a different room this time.

Character-Portrayal : Miss Logie

A new character by the name of Miss Logie is introduced in this Chapter. She is described as a tall, energetic woman in her late middle age. She is not pompous or aggressive as women in authority generally are. She appears to Mr. Biswas to be a most alert and intelligent kind of woman. In fact, Mr. Biswas feels that he had previously known no Indian woman of her age so intelligent and inquisitive.

Shama, a Well-Informed Woman

Shama feels perfectly at ease in Miss Logie's company when Miss Logie takes Mr. Biswas and his family for a trip to a sea-resort. Mr. Biswas is surprised to find Shama talking to Miss Logie freely and without any inhibition. In fact, Shama shows herself to be quite a garrulous person. She expresses her opinions about the new constitution, the federation, the issue of immigration, the future of Hinduism, the education of women, and so on. However, she makes several grammatical mistakes while speaking to Miss Logie in English.

Mr. Biswas, Jealous of W.C. Tuttle

W.C. Tuttle buys a house of his own and feels quite self-important. His purchase of a house makes Mr. Biswas quite jealous.

However, W.C. Tuttle has to face some difficulty in getting possession of the house, and this pleases Mr. Biswas. The previous tenants in the house are not prepared to vacate it, and W.C. Tuttle has to invent an excuse that the house is dangerous and has to be repaired. W.C. Tuttle's trick works, and the house is vacated. The Tuttles leave Mrs. Tulsi's house without ceremony because they have not been on good terms with any of the inmates. Only Mrs. Tuttle kisses her sisters and some of the children. The sisters shed tears at the time of Mrs. Tuttle's departure. The sisters are as tearful at this moment as if Mrs. Tuttle had just been married.

Mrs. Tulsi's Ailments ; Her Piety ; Her Preference For Myna

Mrs. Tulsi now also shifts from her house at Shorthills to her house in Port of Spain, and occupies the two rooms vacated by the Tuttles. Mrs. Tulsi is reported to be ill, although no precise illness is specified. It is said that her eyes ache, that her heart is bad, that her head is always hurting her, that her stomach is not functioning properly, and that every other day she develops fever. Time hangs heavily on Mrs. Tulsi's hands. She does not feel interested in reading. The radio irritates her. She never feels any inclination to go out. She moves from her room to the lavatory and back. Her only comfort is talk. She feels keenly dissatisfied with her whole family and says to Miss Blackie, her Negro servant : "I have no luck with my family. I have no luck with my race." A Jewish refugee doctor comes once a week to attend upon Mrs. Tulsi. Mrs. Tulsi treats him with great affection. She sends him gifts of fruits regularly. Although Mrs. Tulsi expresses her dissatisfaction with her daughters, she takes care not to offend her sons-in-law. She even greets Mr. Biswas with much politeness. Sometimes she feels like seeing the children of her daughters around her, and on such occasions she summons them all to come and scrub the floor of her rooms, or she makes them sing Hindi religious songs. She also shows much concern about the health of the children. At regular intervals she gives to each of them a dose of Epsom salts. Anand's asthma makes her very uneasy, and she sometimes gives him brandy and water. Sometimes Mrs. Tulsi sends for old friends from Arwacas. They come and stay with her for a week or so, listening to her talk. She also holds *puja* functions regularly, though without the feasting and gaiety which used to mark such functions at Hanuman House. A pundit comes on such occasions, reads from the scriptures, takes his money, and leaves. For every *puja* Mrs. Tulsi tries a different pundit because no pundit can please her as much as Hari used to do. And Hari is now dead. As no pundit can please her sufficiently, her faith in Hinduism begins to waver. She sends Sushila to light candles in the Roman Catholic church on her behalf. She puts a crucifix in her room; and she even observes All Saints' Day. Her mind is now most of the time occupied with thoughts of her own illness and the decay of her body. Finding that there are some lice in her hair, she summons some of the younger girls in the house to

come and pick the lice. Of all these girls she likes Mr. Biswas's daughter Myna the best. Her preference for Myna creates a feeling of jealousy in the other girls.

The Change in Seth's Circumstances

One day Mr. Biswas pays a visit to Hanuman House when he goes to Arwacas in connection with his official duties. No one now lives in Hanuman House with the exception of a widow. Mr. Biswas learns that Seth, who continues to live at Arwacas though in a different house, is no longer an important man. For some time after the death of his wife, Seth had indulged in wild behaviour as a result of which he had lost much local support. Having tried to cheat an insurance company by deliberately setting fire to one of his old lorries and claiming compensation from the company, he had been prosecuted on a charge of conspiracy. He had been acquitted by the court, but the litigation had cost him much money and he had thereafter begun to lead a quiet and passive existence. He now no longer speaks of buying over Hanuman House. His quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi has now become past history. Neither Seth nor the Tulsis are as important at Arwacas as they had been.

Mr. Biswas's State of Mind

Mr. Biswas's state of mind keeps fluctuating now. Although Anand's unexpected success in the exhibition examination had brought much pleasure to Mr. Biswas and although Myna too has passed her final school examination, Mr. Biswas suffers from fits of depression. In fact, a change comes over him without his understanding its cause. The city of Port of Spain seems to have lost its romance and its promise for him. He feels as if he has no future. His visions of the future are only visions of Anand's future, not his own future. He begins to sink into despair as if into a void. Every morning, when he goes to his office, he heaves a sigh of relief at his escape from the crowded Tulsi house. At the beginning of this Chapter, we are given an account of Mr. Biswas's state of mind, which once again reveals the morbid streak in his nature. His depression and his sense of desolation end only when he receives an offer of a job as the Community Welfare Officer on a decent salary. Now he feels revitalized. He begins to prepare himself for performing the duties of his new job in right earnest. He borrows books from the Central Library and from the department which has employed him. He reads books on sociology though he cannot understand them fully. Then he reads some books about village reconstruction in India, and finds them quite amusing. He reads the details pertaining to Indian cottage industries. Then he goes on to read books on psychology. However, Mr. Biswas's mood of exhilaration is suddenly interrupted when Miss Logie expresses a desire to meet his family. He experiences a feeling of inferiority and finds it very embarrassing to introduce Miss Logie to his family at Mrs. Tulsi's house where a multitude of Mrs. Tulsi's daughters and sons-in-law

and their children live under depressing conditions. He tries to put off Miss Logie but she still comes in her Buick car to pick up Mr. Biswas and his family in order to take them for a trip to a sea-resort. Mr. Biswas experiences a sense of shame on this occasion because of the large number of Tulsi children who have collected on the pavement. While getting into Miss Logie's car he tells Miss Logie that these children are the orphans of this locality. With the increase in his salary, Mr. Biswas buys some new suits for himself and then one day, dressed in one of these new suits, he goes to witness a cricket match, with a tin of cigarettes and a box of matches in his hand in accordance with the current fashion. Then soon he begins to feel disgusted with his new duties because he finds the task of classifying his material an irksome one. He tells Shama that this blasted work is making him sick and says that it would have been better if he had continued his work as an investigator of the cases of the deserving destitutes. Shama retorts that wherever he works his experience is always the same and that he is never happy anywhere. Mr. Biswas's reaction to W.C. Tuttle's purchase of a house is one of resentment because Mr. Biswas himself has no house of his own. He feels quite happy when he learns that W.C. Tuttle is having some difficulty in getting the house vacated by the old tenants. Mr. Biswas's reaction to Mrs. Tulsi's message that he should temporarily vacate the accommodation which he is occupying in her house is one of deep resentment. He tells Shama that "the old bitch", meaning Mrs. Tulsi, cannot throw him out of the house without providing him with alternative accommodation. Looking in the direction of Mrs. Tulsi's room, he says: "Die, you bitch! Die!" He regrets his daughter Myna having served Mrs. Tulsi by having picked the lice from Mrs. Tulsi's hair. He vows never to talk to Mrs. Tulsi again. He is appeased only when he learns that Mrs. Tulsi is giving him alternative accommodation in one of her tenements nearby. However, his life in the tenement makes him feel even more miserable than he had been before. Mrs. Tulsi's house takes three months to be renovated and then Mr. Biswas and his family return to it, though not to the two rooms which they were previously occupying. Those two rooms have now been reserved for Owad who is coming back from England. Towards the end of this Chapter we are told that Mr. Biswas has now begun to make fresh calculations about the future of his children and about his own future. Anand is now more than half-way through college. Mr. Biswas feels that soon his family responsibilities would end because the elder children would be able to look after the younger ones.

Family Relationships

We also get in this Chapter another of the numerous pictures of family life which this novel contains. In the beginning of this Chapter we are told that Mr. Biswas's truce with W.C. Tuttle was broken, then patched up, and then broken again. Then we are told that Anand and Vidiadhar continue to be hostile to each other. The two boys agree upon equal responsibilities in terms. Then mutual hostility

becomes known at the college where they are students. Vidiadhar has managed to join the college despite his failure in the exhibition examination ; but he has been admitted to a lower class. Govind continues to beat his wife Chinta, and he continues to wear his three-piece suits and to drive his taxi. W.C. Tuttle buys a fifteen-year old American gramophone record and plays it repeatedly on the gramophone. Then, later in the Chapter, we are told of a visit by Mr. Biswas and his children to the house of Tara and Ajodha where they meet Jagdat and Rabidat (the two sons of Bhandat and the nephews of Ajodha). Mr. Biswas goes to Tara's house in his new car. Jagdat would like to drive the car just for fun but Mr. Biswas does not permit him to do so. Shama taunts her husband on having such mean persons as Jagdat in his family. However, Ajodha is quite hospitable to Mr. Biswas and his children. Still later in this Chapter, we are told something about the reaction of the Tulsi daughters to their brother Shekhar and his wife Dorothy. When Shekhar and his family come to see Mrs. Tulsi, the Tulsi daughters are not exactly pleased. If Shekhar had come alone, his sisters would certainly have welcomed him warmly. But the antagonism between Shekhar's sisters and his Presbyterian wife Dorothy has deepened with Shekhar's increasing prosperity. Shekhar had offered employment to some of the impoverished widows in the Tulsi household in his cinemas, but the widows had regarded this offer as an insult because they had thought that Dorothy must be behind this offer. They had told Shekhar that they would never work in a place of public entertainment. Shekhar's sisters feel even more annoyed when they find that in their presence his wife Dorothy speaks to her daughters in Spanish. Dorothy wants not only to show off her knowledge of Spanish but also to insult Shekhar's sisters by talking to her daughters in a language not understood by Shekhar's sisters. Dorothy is now the mother of five children—all daughters. At the end of every visit to Mrs. Tulsi, Shekhar and Dorothy always call on Mr. Biswas, although Mr. Biswas does not relish these calls. Shekhar is in the habit of making betittling remarks about Mr. Biswas and, besides, the political party to which Shekhar belongs has been campaigning against the Community Welfare Department of which Mr. Biswas is now an employee.

Humour

There is plenty of comedy in this Chapter, as in most of the other Chapters in this novel. It is very amusing to find Mr. Biswas inventing all kinds of excuses and resorting to various subterfuges in an attempt to avoid Miss Logie's visiting the Tulsi house where he lives. One of the excuses he makes is that the children are suffering from mumps and that therefore it would be undesirable for Miss Logie to come to the house. Govind's comment upon Mr. Biswas's car is quite amusing, as is Ajodha's comment on the vehicle. Govind calls this car a match-box, while Ajodha describes it as a piece of cardboard and laughingly suggests to Mr. Biswas to be careful while

driving it because there is a danger of its being blown off the road by the wind. We feel amused also when subsequently we find that the car, which Mr. Biswas had parked on sand, has sunk into it, making it difficult for Mr. Biswas to drive it away. Mr. Biswas's reactions to W.C. Tuttle's purchase of a house and his difficulty in having that house vacated by the previous tenants are also quite amusing. Mr. Biswas provides further evidence of his sarcastic wit when he mocks at Shama for having permitted Myna to go and pick the lice from Mrs. Tulsi head, a service which Mrs. Tulsi has rewarded by asking Mr. Biswas and his family to vacate the accommodation which they were occupying. It is also amusing to find Mr. Biswas using bad language for Mrs. Tulsi and for wishing her to die.

PART TWO, CHAPTER SIX

THE REVOLUTION

Plot-Developments

- (1) Owad is at last coming back from England. Mrs. Tulsi feels very gay at the prospect of her son's return.
- (2) The entire Tulsi clan are present at the wharf to receive Owad. Even Seth has come from Arwacas to receive his nephew.
- (3) The ship touches the harbour, and Owad descends to the wharf. He is received warmly by everybody, though he ignores Seth because of the rift which has taken place between his mother and Seth.
- (4) Mr. Biswas too has come to receive Owad, but he soon leaves the wharf and drives away to his area to attend to his official duties.
- (5) Owad talks a good deal about his experiences in England. He says that he had rendered to the people of London many valuable services during the War. He also says that he had performed surgical operations upon many famous men.
- (6) Owad talks about the many distinguished men whom he had met in England.
- (7) Owad has returned to Trinidad as a thorough-going Communist. He speaks admiringly of the achievements of the Russian people and of the Russian system of Government.
- (8) Under the influence of Owad's praise of Russian Communism, almost everybody in the Tulsi household becomes an admirer of the same. In fact, everyone now begins to wait for a Communist Revolution which would transform life in Trinidad also.

- (9) Owad gets a job at the Colonial Hospital in Port of Spain. All his sick and ailing relatives come to him for treatment, and he attends to them most readily.
- (10) Anand too falls under the influence of Owad's ideas.
- (11) Mr. Biswas begins to feel most uncomfortable in the house, because the return of Owad and his settling down in this house have made conditions even more difficult for Mr. Biswas than before.
- (12) A furious quarrel now takes place between Mr. Biswas and Mrs. Tulsi. Mrs. Tulsi asks him to quit her house, and he says that he has no desire at all to continue living here.
- (13) Mr. Biswas now goes about looking for suitable accommodation for himself and his family.
- (14) Mr. Biswas buys a house from a solicitor's clerk. The house is situated in Sikkim Street.
- (15) In order to pay for the house, Mr. Biswas has to borrow four thousand dollars from Ajodha.
- (16) Owad begins to spend more and more time away from home ; and all talk of a Communist Revolution now comes to an end in Mrs. Tulsi's house.

Character-Portrayal : Owad

This Chapter is devoted almost wholly to a portrayal of Owad. Owad has undergone a transformation during his eight-year stay in England. The inmates of the Tulsi house in Port of Spain feel spell-bound to hear Owad's account of his experiences in England. Owad tells his kinsfolk that, as a result of the services he had rendered to the people in London during the War, he had been offered many jobs and that he had even been invited to stand for the British Parliament. He says that he had met many eminent personalities such as Russell, Joad, Radhakrishnan, Laski, and Krishna Menon. Owad had particularly disliked Krishna Menon. In fact, Owad has developed a prejudice against all Indians. In his opinion the Indians coming from India were a disgrace to those Indians who had already been settled in Trinidad or in England for many years. The Indians now coming from India were arrogant, treacherous, and lecherous. In England these Indians went around with nurses and other women of the lower classes and were frequently involved in scandals. The moment these Indians arrived in England, they started eating meat and drinking liquor to prove their modernity. Owad's sisters agree with him whole-heartedly in his views about such Indians. His sisters speak of the misconduct of the missionaries, merchants, doctors, and politicians who had recently come from India to Trinidad. Owad also grows eloquent when talking about Russian Communism. He speaks of the achievements of the Russian army during the War, and he speaks of the glories

of the Russian system of government. He says that in the 1945 elections in England, he had canvassed for the Labour Party, and that he had earned the bitter hatred of the Conservative Party by his strong criticism of Winston Churchill's Fulton speech. Owad speaks familiarly of Russian generals and their battles, and he pronounces Russian names in a very impressive manner. He tells his listeners that in Russia there is work for everyone and that everyone is under an obligation to work. Even a woman like Sushila can become a doctor in Russia if she has the necessary inclination and the aptitude. He says that all education, even medical education, is free in that country. Nor is there any discrimination between the sexes in that country. In Russia a journalist or a writer is given a house, is given food, is given money, and is told to go ahead and write. Indeed, Owad's appetite for talk is insatiable. His dramatic gift never fails while he is talking. The comments which he makes on the people he had met are invariably adverse and pungent.

The Euphoria Over Owad's Return

For many days after Owad's return from England, the Tulsi house in Port of Spain wears a festive look. Visitors who had come to meet him leave, and more visitors arrive. All sorts of persons such as the iceman, the postman, the beggars, the street-sweepers, and stray children are brought to the house and fed. The food is supplied by Mrs. Tulsi, and there is communal cooking, as there used to be at Hanuman House. Owad is looked at with admiring eyes; and it is regarded as an honour to be spoken to by him. Everything he says is afterwards repeated by those who have heard him. At any time Owad might start talking about some new experience of his, and then a crowd of his relatives immediately collects to listen to him. Regularly in the evenings there are gatherings in the drawing-room. Mr. Biswas attends these gatherings as often as he can while Mrs. Tulsi, forgetting her illnesses, holds Owad's hand while he speaks. As a result of Owad's talks, the Tulsi House is in a state of excitement and ferment. Everyone now waits for a communist Revolution in Trinidad. The transformation which takes place in Owad is to be regarded as another example of the impact of western culture on the orthodox Tulsi family which now offers a blend of the old Hindu culture and the western culture. The confrontation of the two cultures is one of the leading themes of this novel.

Shekhar and Dorothy

Shekhar, Dorothy, and their five daughters now start coming to the Tulsi House regularly in order to meet Owad. These visits give to Shekhar's sisters an opportunity for giving an outlet to their grievances and their grudge against Dorothy. His sisters treat Dorothy. On one occasion, Dorothy brings a cousin of hers to meet Owad. This cousin is a handsome young woman who had graduated from McGill University in Canada and she has all the elegance of an

Indian girl from South Trinidad. When Dorothy and her cousin have gone away, Owad makes fun of the cousin by denigrating her Canadian degree, her Canadian accent, and her claim to a proficiency in music. Owad pokes fun at her for having gone all the way to Canada to learn to play the violin. He says that, if she tries to play the violin in his presence, he would break the instrument on the heads of her parents. (Owad's criticism of Dorothy's cousin is fraught with irony because in the epilogue we shall be told that Owad gets married to this very girl).

Mr. Biswas

Owad's return to Trinidad and his taking up residence in his mother's house in Port of Spain creates a complication for Mr. Biswas. Already Mr. Biswas has not been feeling happy in this house because of its being a crowded, noisy, and dirty place. Now the tumult created by Owad's presence aggravates matters for him. The result is that he begins to lose his temper over little things. Ultimately he loses his temper with both Owad and Mrs. Tulsi. When Mrs. Tulsi hears Mr. Biswas shouting, she says that he can go to hell. Mr. Biswas asks her if he should go to hell in order to prepare the way for her: "Go to hell? Go to hell? To prepare the way for you?" Mrs. Tulsi begins to sob and appeals to her son Owad who speaks loudly and angrily. Mr. Biswas does not spare even Owad and says that communism like charity should begin at home. Mr. Biswas then says that he is going to quit this house and that he made a mistake by having agreed to live here in the first instance: "I am giving you notice. I curse the day I stepped into your house." Mrs. Tulsi retorts that he had come to her house with no more clothes than could be hung on a nail. Mr. Biswas repeats that he is giving her notice that he is quitting. Mrs. Tulsi in reply gives him notice to vacate her house. By next morning, Mr. Biswas's anger has subsided and he feels ashamed of the scene that he had created. However, he has already committed himself to quitting the house, and so he starts looking for accommodation elsewhere. He happens to meet a solicitor's clerk in a cafe and strikes a bargain with him about that man's house which is situated in Sikkim Street and which the man wants to sell. Mr. Biswas inspects the house rather casually because it is raining heavily at the time, and he therefore does not realize that he is being duped by the solicitor's clerk. Not having enough money for the purchase of the house, he feels compelled to borrow four thousand dollars from his uncle Ajodha. Ajodha gives him the loan, not knowing that Mr. Biswas has not yet even paid all the instalments of the loan he had taken to buy a car, and that Mr. Biswas is not even holding a permanent post. The loan taken from Ajodha is repayable in five years, and the interest on it would come to thirty dollars a month.

Mrs. Tulsi and Owad

Mrs. Tulsi now spends much of her time in her room, wanting her hair to be soaked in bay rum, and listening for Owad's footsteps.

With Owad's return she has become too sentimental. She now talks of the injustice that has been done to her by her own family, of the way in which she has been neglected by everybody, and of the way all her relations have proved ungrateful to her. After the quarrel with Mr. Biswas, Owad becomes reserved. Owad begins to spend more time away from home. He begins to mix with his medical colleagues and he often visits Shekhar. He plays tennis at the India Club. And the result of his spending most of his time away from the house is that all talk of a Communist Revolution comes to an end in the Tulsi home.

Shama

Shama strongly disapproves of the transaction into which Mr. Biswas has entered with the solicitor's clerk about the latter's house, especially when she learns about the heavy sum of money which has to be paid for it. She says to Mr. Biswas : "You mad ! You mad ! You hanging a millstone around my neck." Mr. Biswas's reply to this is that he is hanging a necklace around her neck. She is filled with despair, and she reminds him that he is still paying for the car and that, besides, he does not know how long his government job is going to last.

Humour

There is plenty of comedy in this Chapter too. The very boisterousness of the kinsfolk at Owad's return to Trinidad, and the enthusiasm and admiration with which they all listen to Owad's accounts of his stay abroad are amusing. Their expecting a Communist Revolution in Trinidad is really funny. The behaviour of Owad's sisters is also quite comic. The sisters seek private meetings with Owad, singly or in small groups. Each sister feels that she has a special hold on him and, in return for his confidence, she offers her own confidence to him. At first they all speak to him individually of their financial difficulties. Then they complain about the teachers who are not taking sufficient interest in their children at school. They complain about Dorothy and about Shekhar. Then they complain about their own husbands. And they go so far as to complain also about those of their sisters who are not living in this house. The sisters speak to Owad about every scandal, about every petty dispute, and about every resentment. They talk all these things generally at night; and in the morning they become exceptionally friendly towards the very persons whom they had criticized at night. One of the sisters, namely Chinta, falls under Owad's spell to such an extent that she begins to detest Krishna Menon simply because Owad has said that he detested that Indian politician. In fact, all the sisters begin to share Owad's prejudices, especially his prejudice against the Indians who are now visiting Trinidad or London, as distinguished from those Indians who had settled down in Trinidad many years ago. The behaviour of the learners and readers is also comic. Having heard

that a Communist Revolution might take place in Trinidad and that this Revolution would destroy the present system altogether, these young scholars relax their efforts to read and learn, and they begin to despise their teachers whom they had previously been respecting deeply. Anand's behaviour, after having listened to Owad's talk, is also very funny. At first he falls under Owad's influence to such an extent that he adopts all Owad's political and artistic views. Anand now declares at school that he is a Communist and that he hates T.S. Eliot. However, after having been snubbed by Owad in the course of a game of cards, Anand discards Owad's views, though he subsequently apologizes to Owad and adopts those views again. After Mr. Biswas has quarrelled with Owad and Mrs. Tulsi and has decided to quit this house, Anand once again discards Owad's views.

PART TWO, CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HOUSE

Plot-Developments

- (1) The house purchased by Mr. Biswas from the solicitor's clerk is found to have many defects. It has no back door; two of the wooden pillars supporting the staircase-landing are rotten; in fact, the staircase is dangerous. The house is in need of extensive repairs, and that means more expense.
- (2) After discovering the defects in this house, Mr. Biswas describes the solicitor's clerk as a tout, as a crook, as a Nazi, and as a blasted Communist.
- (3) After Mr. Biswas has shifted to the house, his neighbour there informs him that the solicitor's clerk is a real cheat, a fraud, a speculator who had made it a practice to build ramshackle, fragile houses, and give them a decent look in order to sell them at a big profit.
- (4) Mr. Biswas finds that he has a legal right to some additional space and he therefore finds it possible to extend the boundary of the house. In the extra space, Mr. Biswas plants a laburnum tree which grows rapidly and gives to the house a romantic look. The flowers of this tree are found to be sweet.

A Defective House

At last Mr. Biswas has a house of his own. But what a house he has got! It is a very defective house. Apart from the house being a fragile structure, the yard has no drainage so that during the rains the yard becomes very muddy. The house has no back door, and the windows downstairs do not close, while the front door flies open when a strong wind blows even if the door is locked and bolted.

The solicitor's clerk is evidently a jerry-builder.* But, although, Mr. Biswas and his family discover many defects in the house and feel upset by their discovery, the Chapter ends on a happy note. Mr. Biswas gets some additional space where he plants a laburnum tree which gives a romantic aspect to the house and which also provides some shelter from the afternoon sun. "Its flowers were sweet, and in the still hot evenings their smell filled the house."

Humour

The defects in the house purchased by Mr. Biswas are described in such a manner that we feel greatly amused : "In the days that followed they made more discoveries. The landing pillars had rotted because they stood next to a tap which emerged from the back wall of the house. The water from the tap simply ran into the ground. Shama spoke about the possibility of subsidence. Then they discovered that the yard had no drainage of any sort" Mr. Biswas's description of the solicitor's clerk as a tout, as a crook, as a Nazi, and as a blasted Communist is also very amusing. Mr. Biswas also finds himself burdened with a rediffusion set for which he has to pay two dollars as monthly rent. Land-rent is ten dollars a month, and this is six dollars more than he was paying to Mrs. Tulsi for the room he occupied in her house : "Land-rent, rediffusion set, rates, interest, repairs, debt : he was discovering commitments almost as fast as he discovered the house." And more expense is to be incurred in getting the sewer pipes laid and in getting the lavatory repaired. The result of all this is that Mr. Biswas is left with no money at all, and Shama has to borrow two hundred dollars from Basdai, the widow who is keeping boarders and lodgers. The account of Mr. Biswas and his family shifting to the new house is also very amusing. Their furniture, to which they had become accustomed, suddenly seems to them to be shabby and shameful when exposed on the lorry on which it is loaded. The furniture represents their gatherings of a life-time : the kitchen-safe with its paint of various colours ; the yellow kitchen-table ; the hat-rack with its broken hooks ; the rocking-chair ; the four-poster ; the dressing-table without a mirror ; the book-case ; and the desk. Shama and Anand ride with the furniture on the lorry. Mr. Biswas's daughters go with him in his car, because they carry dresses which would have been damaged by packing. Then we are amused again when we go through Mr. Biswas's new neighbour's description of the kind of man the solicitor's clerk is. This is what the neighbour, an old Indian, says about the solicitor's clerk : "The man was a joke. As I says, it was like a hobby to him. Picking up window frames here and there, from the American base and where not. Picking up a door here and another one there and bringing them here. A real disgrace. A

*A jerry-builder is one who uses inferior materials in building houses.

speculator, that's what he was. A real speculator. This aint the first house he built like this, you know. He built two-three in Belmont, one in Woodbrook, this one, and right now he is building one in Morvant."

EPILOGUE

Plot-Developments

- (1) Owad has got married to Dorothy's cousin and, resigning his job in the Colonial Hospital, he moves to San Fernando where he starts private practice.
- (2) At the end of the same year, the Community Welfare Department is abolished by the government and Mr. Biswas loses his job.
- (3) Mr. Biswas now goes back to his job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*.
- (4) The debt which Mr. Biswas owes to Ajodha becomes a heavy weight on Mr. Biswas's mind. The thought of the debt frustrates his energy and his ambition.
- (5) There is a sudden burst of good luck for the family when first Savi gets a scholarship to go abroad and when, two years later, Anand gets a scholarship and goes to England.
- (6) Anand's letters from England are gloomy and full of self-pity.
- (7) Mr. Biswas now suffers from a permanent depression : he has to wait for Anand and he has to wait for Savi ; he has to wait for the end of the five years during which he has to repay the loan ; he has to wait and wait.
- (8) Then one day Mr. Biswas gets a heart-attack and has to spend a month in the hospital.
- (9) Anand's letters now come at long intervals and they are not very encouraging. The *Trinidad Sentinel* puts Mr. Biswas on half-pay.
- (10) Then Mr. Biswas gets another heart-attack and is again admitted to hospital where he remains for six weeks. He is still waiting for Savi, for Anand, and for the five years to end. He becomes more and more irritable.
- (11) The *Trinidad Sentinel* now dispenses with Mr. Biswas's services after giving him three months' notice. In the whole world there is nobody to whom Mr. Biswas can complain.
- (12) Savi returns to Trinidad and gets a job at a bigger salary than Mr. Biswas himself could ever have got. Mr. Biswas now begins to enjoy Savi's company.

- (13) Then Mr. Biswas dies, and the *Trinidad Sentinel* announces his death in the following words : "Journalist Dies Suddenly."
- (14) All Shama's sisters come to share her sorrow.
- (15) Mr. Biswas is cremated on the banks of a muddy stream and attracts spectators of various communities and races. The cremation is one of the few permitted by the Health Department.

A Moving, Pathetic Account

The Epilogue contains a very moving account of Mr. Biswas's predicament and his death. Mr. Biswas's government job is gone, and he has to eat the humble pie by returning to the *Trinidad Sentinel* on a lower salary than he was getting as a Community Welfare Officer. He now wants to sell his car, but Shama does not permit him to do so. The debt which Mr. Biswas owes to his uncle Ajodha weighs heavily on his mind. He no longer has any ambition in life : "His enthusiasm, unsupported by ambition, faded. His work became painstaking and laboured ; the zest went out of his articles as it had gone out of himself. He grew dull and querulous and ugly. Living had always been a preparation, a waiting. And so the years had passed ; and now there was nothing to wait for." The heart-attacks which he gets constitute a very pathetic episode in his life. His dismissal by the *Trinidad Sentinel* comes as a very painful blow to him and to us. Savi's return and her getting a well-paid job are the only ray of light in the life of Mr. Biswas now. Anand has proved a big disappointment to Mr. Biswas, and his letters contain no news to provide any hope to his father. Mr. Biswas's premature death completes the tragedy of his life. His only achievement in his life has been buying a house of his own, but even the house is mortgaged.

The Element of Humour

There is a touch of humour even in this moving account of Mr. Biswas's troubles. When Mr. Biswas suddenly collapses in his office one day, the author says that it was not Mr. Biswas's stomach which was at fault, the stomach which had been a permanent source of trouble to him and which, he had so often said, he would like to cut out of himself and have a good look at, to see exactly what was playing the fool. The cause of his trouble now was not the stomach but the heart about which he had never complained.

The Disintegration of the Tulsi Family

The Tulsi clan has now disintegrated. Owad has left his mother's house and shifted to another town to set up his private practice. Shekhar had already been living separately with his wife and daughter. Aggarwal had detected a long time back. Mrs. Tulsi's

many daughters are no longer living with her in the same house. They have all shifted to their own houses, some in the town and some in the countryside. Now they gather only on special occasions such as a funeral. All the sisters of Shama come to condole with her on the occasion of Mr. Biswas's death. For them it is an occasion for reunion, and such occasions are not frequent. After the cremation, the sisters return to their respective homes while Shama and her children go back in their Prefect car to their empty house. (The house is described as "empty" because Mr. Biswas is no longer there).

9

“A House for Mr. Biswas”: A Critical Appreciation

His Fourth, and His Best, Novel

A House for Mr. Biswas is Naipaul's fourth novel, having been published in 1961. It is also perhaps his best novel. Naipaul has himself said that, of all his books, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the one closest to him. "It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child," he has said. Thus, the novel has a good deal of autobiographical value. The central character in the novel is Mr. Biswas who was modelled on Naipaul's own father. The story is set in Trinidad where Naipaul was born and where several other stories written by Naipaul have also been set. To some extent, this is a regional novel, like much of Naipaul's other fiction; but again, like much of his other fiction, this novel has a universal significance.

The Quality of Realism

The most striking quality of this novel, as of all other works of Naipaul, is realism. There is nothing fantastic or far-fetched in the entire story. The characters are perfectly convincing, and so are the events. There is no exaggeration in the portrayal of characters, and no manipulation or straining after effects in the handling of the story. Indeed, in this novel, as in most others written by him, Naipaul holds a mirror to real life as he saw it with his own eyes in Trinidad or elsewhere. The novel thus bears the stamp of authenticity. The realism of character-portrayal and of the events is reinforced by the realism of descriptive details. In this respect, Naipaul, with his minute eye for detail, reminds us of Charles Dickens. Whether it be the description of Hanuman House and the running of the Tulsi household, or the description of the village of The Chase, or the description of Green Vale and its environs, or the description of the mountainous region of Shorthills, or the description of the city of Port of Spain, Naipaul impresses us greatly with

his close and accurate observation, and with his recording all the smallest details, especially details of a sordid kind. Like Dickens, this author takes particular notice of the details of squalor.

The Theme of Rebellion and Independence

The major theme of this novel is a sensitive man's rebellion against tyranny and his desperate struggle to achieve independence. Although Mr. Biswas comes from a humble peasant family, yet he is a man of great self-respect. He is not awed by the atmosphere of Hanuman House or the status of the Tulsi family into which he has got married. He can see the other sons-in-law of the Tulsi family living in a state of perfect contentment with the conditions and the terms on which they are maintained and supported by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth; but he does not follow their example. On the contrary, he quickly rebels against the Tulsi code of conduct which he was expected to obey. The inmates of Hanuman House are completely under the sway of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth; and there is no voice of dissent in the household. Mr. Biswas feels that conformity to the Tulsi code of conduct means a complete suppression of his individuality, and he therefore revolts against the system. At first he tries to make an ally of one or two other sons-in-law of the family but he miserably fails in this endeavour and is even thrashed in the process. But the spirit of rebellion in him is not quenched by the setback which he receives. He passes sarcastic remarks about various members of the Tulsi family, showing scant respect to the two autocrats, namely Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. His rebelliousness leads to his expulsion from Hanuman House, and to his being sent to The Chase to look after the Tulsi food-shop. When he fails to run the food-shop profitably, he is sent to Green Vale to supervise the work of the labourers on the Tulsi estate, but he fails in this undertaking also and, oppressed by his sense of loneliness and his fears about the future, he falls gravely ill. At the hour of crisis, it is Hanuman House which offers him protection. But, as soon as he recovers from his illness, his spirit of revolt reasserts itself and he goes away to Port of Spain to try his luck in that metropolitan city. Here again he has to face the vicissitudes of life and has once again to depend on the charity or generosity of Mrs. Tulsi for residential accommodation for himself and his family. Finally, he makes a complete break with the Tulsi family and buys a house of his own even though he has to take a big loan from a relative in order to pay for it. At last, Mr. Biswas achieves his independence and stands on his own feet, even though he does not live long enough to enjoy the fruits of his freedom. Hanuman House in this novel serves as a symbol of authoritarianism and autocracy; while Mr. Biswas symbolizes an independent man's urge to find his own identity and to carve out a niche for himself. Mr. Biswas is by no means a unique person; there are thousands of people who possess the same instinct for freedom and the same desire for a climate in

which they can breathe freely and in which they can seek the development and the fulfilment of their own potentialities.

The Theme of the Interaction of Cultures and of the Dissolution of a Clan Under the Pressures of an Alien Culture

An almost equally important theme in this novel is the interaction of cultures and of the dissolution of a close-knit clan through its contacts with an alien culture. The Tulsi household represents the old Hindu culture which had been imported into Trinidad by Pundit Tulsi and by thousands of other Indians who had emigrated from India to Trinidad. Mrs. Tulsi is very keen to preserve the culture of which she and Seth think themselves to be the custodians. The family performs daily *pūja*; and the various rituals prescribed by religious orthodoxy are regularly performed. The family has acquired a pundit in one of its own sons-in-law. This man, called Hari, is well-versed in all these rituals, and he performs them with great apparent zeal. The Tulsi family maintains also a united front against all outsiders. It believes in the ideal of family solidarity. Every member of the family has his or her own duties to perform; and everybody makes his or her own contribution to the work to be done, whether in the Tulsi fields, or in the Tulsi Store, or in the Tulsi home. But, as the story moves forward, we find the orthodox values and beliefs crumbling. Mrs. Tulsi feels compelled to make compromises with the alien western culture. She feels compelled to send her two sons to Roman Catholic educational institutions. She has to permit her sons to wear crucifixes; she has to permit Shekhar to marry a Christian wife; she has afterwards to send her son Owad for medical studies to England even though some of the members of her family still remain opposed to the idea of foreign travel which they regard as a regrettable deviation from the Hindu religious code. Other members of the family also come under the influence of the western culture. For instance, in course of time, Govind completely breaks away from the family hold upon him; he stops working on the Tulsi estate and becomes a taxi-driver, earning his livelihood independently; and soon afterwards he begins to think of buying a separate house to live in. W.C. Tuttle too follows his own personal interests and he actually moves out of the Tulsi home into a house which he has bought with his own earnings. The old allegiance to the Tulsi family is now a thing of the past. Soon afterwards some of the other daughters of Mrs. Tulsi and their husbands also acquire their own separate homes and leave the matriarchal apron-strings. When Owad returns from England, he is a completely westernized man who too gets married to a Christian wife and who then moves to a different city altogether in order to live separately. The joint family system has simply disintegrated. Various family units which had together formed the backbone of the Tulsi clan have dispersed by the time the novel comes to a close. Each unit has succumbed to a desire for independence and to the

urge to promote its own financial interests. The concept of the oneness of the family has received a fatal blow.

The Portrayal of Characters

There are a large number of characters in this novel, as in any novel by Charles Dickens. In other words, we have here a multitudinous variety of characters in the story. It is, indeed, a crowded novel. This crowdedness adds to the realistic effect, because real life is a crowded affair. Having introduced a large number of characters into the story, the author does not ignore any one of them. From time to time, he returns to the characters who have for some time been pushed into the background. The central character, of course, is Mr. Biswas. Other important characters are his wife Shama, his mother-in-law Mrs. Tulsi, and his uncle-in-law Seth. Next in importance are Mrs. Tulsi's two sons, Shekhar and Owad. There are the Tulsi sons-in-law—Govind, Hari, and W.C. Tuttle. There are Mr. Biswas's own relations—Tara, Ajodha, Bhandat and his two sons, Jagdat and Rabidat. There are Mr. Biswas's children, Savi, Anand, Myna, and Kamla. There is Govind's wife Chinta, and their son Vidiadhar. Some of the others who appear only at the beginning of the story and go out of the novel early, or by the time we reach the middle, include Mr. Biswas's father Raghu, Mr. Biswas's teacher Lal, Mr. Biswas's *guru* Pundit Jairam, Mr. Biswas's boyhood-friend Alec, and Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti. There are, too, Mr. Biswas's two brothers Pratap and Prasad, and his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand. The wonder is that each of these characters has been made to live before our eyes. No two characters in the story merge into each other. Each retains his or her own identity. The portrayal is in most cases comic. Naipaul has a genius for seizing upon the funny traits of human character. The important points about Naipaul as a creator of character or as a delineator are *firstly* that the persons in his novels are real human beings and, *secondly*, that his portrayals are largely comic.

A Satirical Novel with an Abundance of Comedy

Although *A House for Mr. Biswas* is essentially a novel with a serious import and significance, and although some of its scenes and situations are very moving and touching, yet it is preponderantly a comic novel. In this novel we witness the author's satirical genius manifesting itself and finding full scope. One of the chief ingredients of comedy in the novel is Mr. Biswas's sarcastic wit. Mr. Biswas's ironic flings and attacks on various members of the family are very amusing. In fact, it is he who, by means of his sarcastic wit, exposes the absurdities of the various members of the Tulsi household. But he is not the only witty person in the novel. Shama too possesses a talent for making sarcastic remarks. Seth is another character who has a strong sense of humour and who can ridicule others. Even Chinta is capable of making fun of others, and she has a pungent wit despite her gentle temper. Much of the comedy in

the novel results from Mr. Biswas's comments upon Mrs. Tulsi, Seth, Owad, and Shekhar. For instance, he refers to Mrs. Tulsi as "the old hen", as "the old cow", and as "a she-fox". He mocks at Seth by referring to him as "the big boss". He ridicules the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi by calling them "the little gods". Shama has always something to say in retaliation when Mr. Biswas thus pokes fun at her family. Seth shows his wit in the manner in which he ridicules the Aryan missionary who has been preaching the reformist views of Arya Samaj and who turns out to be a fraud. Apart from the comedy provided by the witty remarks of the various persons in the novel, we have plenty of the comedy of situation. Mr. Biswas's gargling and spitting the water upon Owad's head and soon afterwards throwing a plateful of food upon the same young man are comic situations which lead to Mr. Biswas's being thrashed by Govind. The thrashing itself has something comic about it because we certainly feel that Mr. Biswas has misbehaved and deserves the punishment which he gets. Hari's spending much of his time in the toilet makes him a comic figure. We can visualize him lingering in the toilet while other members of the family wait outside impatiently. Govind's savage and noisy manner of eating, with curry spilled all over his hand and wrist, is also a comic situation. Mrs. Tulsi's strategic illnesses and fainting-fits are another major source of amusement to us. Whenever Mrs. Tulsi faints, an elaborate ritual is gone through, with the whole household in a state of excitement and perturbation. Generally her fainting-fits are due to some indiscretion committed by one of her sons-in-law. On such occasions, Mrs. Tulsi is immediately taken to her room which is known as the "Rose Room". One daughter then fans Mrs. Tulsi; two massage her legs; one pours bay rum into her hair; a few others stand by, ready to carry out the instructions given to them by the leaders of the team attending upon Mrs. Tulsi. A vein of humour runs throughout the novel, and there are touches of humour even in the account of how Mr. Biswas is duped by the solicitor's clerk whose house he buys.

Pathos

There are a large number of situations which arouse our sympathy for the chief character, namely Mr. Biswas. There are some situations which amuse us and which at the same time arouse our pity. The death of Raghu, the father of Mr. Biswas, is a pathetic episode, because by his death the family has suffered an irreparable loss; and yet it is an amusing situation also because Raghu is drowned while trying to rescue his son Mr. Biswas who is believed to have slipped into the pond but who is actually safe and sound and is hiding under his father's bed at home. The early experiences of Mr. Biswas in Pundit Jairam's house, where he stays for some time in order to be instructed and given practical training for the vocation of a pundit, and his subsequent stay in the house of Bhandat in order to learn the trade of a jeweller, are very saddening

because we find a poor, fatherless boy being knocked about. At the end of the second adventure mentioned above, Mr. Biswas goes home and asks his mother why she always keeps sending him to other people's homes. It is really a pathetic situation. The beating which Mr. Biswas receives from Govind is also a moving situation despite its comic side. Mr. Biswas's experience at The Chase constitutes another gloomy episode. At Green Vale Mr. Biswas's experiences are terrible. Here he builds a house which he cannot complete. Here he begins to be haunted by all kinds of fears and questionings. Here he is oppressed by a sense of desolation and a feeling of loneliness; and here he falls gravely ill and has to be carried to Hanuman House for treatment. This is perhaps the most poignant episode in the whole novel. Then there are the vicissitudes which Mr. Biswas has to experience in Port of Spain and at Shorthills. Next comes the disappointment which he reaps a result of Anand's proving almost a failure in life, despite his early promise. And then there are the two heart-attacks which culminate in the premature death of Mr. Biswas. The novel closes with this climax of Mr. Biswas's tragedy, even though we may feel inclined to maintain that Mr. Biswas has died after having won a triumph by having secured a house of his own.

The Stature of Mr. Biswas in the Design of the Novel

A question which arises in connection with our reading of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is whether Mr. Biswas attains the stature of a hero. Now, this question arises because there is much that is petty and even contemptible about Mr. Biswas. There is an element of perversity in his nature, and also an element of absurdity in him. The Tulsi family regards him as a buffoon and a trouble-maker. There is much that is unreasonable in his attitudes towards the various members of the Tulsi family. Besides, he suffers from many inadequacies and deficiencies in his character. He is no judge of human beings or human nature. He does not prove successful as a husband or as a father. He cannot run a food-shop; and he cannot function properly as a supervisor of the work of labourers on the Tulsi estate. Even as a newspaper reporter he finds his job to be irksome after the first editor, Mr. Burnett, has left the newspaper. Then as a Community Welfare Officer he feels equally uncomfortable because of the nature of his duties. And yet we do regard him as the hero of the novel. His heroism consists in his inherent self-respect, his rebellion against the tyranny of Tulsidom, his continuing endeavour to find his identity, and his continual assertion of his individuality. Whatever his weaknesses and shortcomings, he remains true to himself throughout. His inner dignity remains with him till the end. He never allows his integrity to falter. And he does achieve success of some sort at the end by acquiring a house of his own. His literary attainments and his reflective habit of mind also show that he is much superior to most of those with whom he comes into contact.

Structurally a Loose Novel

A House for Mr. Biswas is structurally not a compact or well-knit novel. There is no principle of organization at work in Naipaul's writing of it. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is written in the picaresque mode. Episode follows episode without much of a logic and without much of a connection. Incident is piled on incident. The main plot concerns, of course, Mr. Biswas and his quest for identity. But there are a large number of subsidiary characters who claim our attention, so that there is no concentration of effect. There are two households with which the novel deals—the Tulsi household and the Tara-Ajodha household; but no close link is established between these two households either through a developing conflict between them or through an increased understanding between them.

A Lack of Romantic Passion; And A Lack of Dramatic Situations

A House for Mr. Biswas is lacking also in romantic passion and in dramatic situations. Now, a novel depends for its interest largely on romantic love. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is certainly an interesting novel; it is even a gripping novel. But its interest could certainly have been enhanced by an element of romantic passion. If Mr. Biswas himself was not capable of romantic love, Shekhar and Dorothy could have been shown as being romantically in love. But, as other novels by Naipaul also show, this author is by temperament not interested in sexual passion or romantic love. There is also a lack of drama in this novel. There is no emotional intensity anywhere in the course of the story. Even the quarrels between Mr. Biswas and the members of the Tulsi clan are described in a minor key. There is no heightening of the pitch in the course of the narration. The only dramatic situation which occurs in the novel is the account of the morbid state of mind of Mr. Biswas leading to his nervous breakdown. Here certainly the emotional pitch attains a dramatic quality.

Psychological Interest

A House for Mr. Biswas is an interesting novel from the psychological point of view also. The novel contains not only the external history of Mr. Biswas's life, but also the history of the development of his mind and its working. The state of Mr. Biswas's mind is depicted by the novelist at the various stages of the hero's life. Once Mr. Biswas has developed into a grown-up man, the working of his mind becomes one of the novelist's chief concerns. No other character in the novel is as thoughtful as Mr. Biswas. In fact, no other character in the novel has any inner life. Mr. Biswas's meditations are described by the novelist at all stages in the course of Mr. Biswas's journey through life. Mr. Biswas's thoughts and feelings at The Chase, at Green Vale, in Port of Spain, at Shorthills, again in Port of Spain, and then after he has purchased a house,

have minutely and accurately been recorded by the author. From the psychological point of view, the Chapter called "Green Vale" is perhaps the most important. During his stay at Geen Vale, Mr. Biswas's sensitive mind is so profoundly affected by his feeling of frustration in life, by his disappointment in not having been able to complete his house, by his fears about the future, by the questionings which oppress him, that he suffers a nervous breakdown. Indeed, this chapter contains a deep analysis of Mr. Biswas's mind and thoughts. But elsewhere also the inner life of Mr. Biswas receives considerable attention from the author.

Autobiographical Interest

This novel is interesting also from the autobiographical point of view. There is much in this novel which is derived from Naipaul's own life and experiences. Mr. Biswas in this novel was modelled on Naipaul's own father, while there is a close resemblance between the life and experiences of Anand and Naipaul himself. Naipaul, for instance, was in England when his father died in Trinidad; and, in the same way, Anand is in England when his father Mr. Biswas dies in Trinidad. Just as Naipaul had won a scholarship to pursue higher studies, so Anand too wins a scholarship to continue his studies. And there are other autobiographical elements in the novel too.

A Critic's Comment

Finally, the following comment by an eminent critic is of great value to us in appreciating this novel :

A House for Mr. Biswas culminates the early phase of Naipaul's artistic development. Combined with his use of vivid colour and action, is an increased depth of character-exposition which anticipates the dark seriousness of his most recent work. The mixed nature of Biswas's desire for self-reliance echoes existential absurdity. Stifled by communal pressures, yet afraid of the chaos of an unstructured society, Biswas is in constant suspension. His marriage into the Tulsi household provides greater security than he has known before, but in return the family demands strict conformity and anonymity.* More than the characters in the previous novels, he strikes out with desperation and foolishness, utilizing his imagination to impose his own sense of personal order on a meaningless, often malevolent, surrounding reality. On one level Biswas shows a courageous, individual struggle; on another his story is allegorical, dramatizing the legacy of colonial paternalism in a post-colonial world. The conclusion is ambivalent. At the time of his death of a heart-attack at age forty-six, Mr. Biswas is living in his own home, but he is unemployed, his house is a structural disaster, and the mortgage is well beyond any possible means of payment. Dubious as his victory seems, it is still better than death in the house of the Tulsis.

*Anonymity here implies the complete extinction or suppression of one's individuality.

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A Note on Structure and Narrative Technique

The Prologue, The Swelling Act, and The Epilogue

According to a critic, this novel has a careful structure, consisting of the Prologue, the Swelling Act, and the Epilogue. This critic refers to the formal, chronological build-up of Mr. Biswas's character. According to him, the thematic design of imagery and symbol, combined with that build-up, makes a purely artistic appeal to the imagination and produces a pervasive contrasting backdrop to Mr. Biswas's quest for form. Furthermore, the even, deliberate structure of the novel, with the recurring images of darkness, decay, and death, makes failure appear throughout as the inevitable outcome to the process of Mr. Biswas's struggle. The very first line of the Prologue tells us that Mr. Biswas is already dead. The Prologue anticipates much of the action that follows in the novel. When the Epilogue repeats a conversation first heard in the Prologue, in which Mr. Biswas tells one of the Tulsi sisters to go and mind her goats, we get the feeling that the result of Mr. Biswas's efforts could not have been otherwise than as depicted in the novel.

A Thematic Pattern of Imagery and Symbol

This critic then goes on to say that Naipaul's narrative technique in this novel relies heavily on a thematic pattern of imagery and symbol. The suffocating conservatism of Hanuman House is suggested by a description which seems to be equally applicable to a prison. The symbolic implications of this description are obvious. Such a place cannot sustain Mr. Biswas's vague romantic longings. The atmosphere inside Hanuman House has a death-like quality, and the "blackness seemed to fill the kitchen like a solid substance." The "heavy braceleted arms" of Mrs. Tulsi, which permit her no

more than "a clumsy dancer's gesture", are suggestive of oppressive restraints placed on individual and spontaneous movement. Any notions of the dance are here made impotent by the lifeless externals of a dying culture. The sick and dying nature of the family's Hindu rites is suggested through the portrayal of the religious functionary, Hari, who spends most of his time in the toilet.

The Physical and Spiritual Deterioration of Mr. Biswas

To Mr. Biswas, the society in which he finds himself is a "limiting" one. The environment, in which he lives, does not offer to him any possibility of escape. The road from The Chase goes to villages which are just like The Chase; they go to "ramshackle towns where perhaps one might see one of Mr. Biswas's own signs" pointing to his ramshackle past. In the shop at The Chase are the relics of past ownership, pathetic reminders of futile effort. The physical and spiritual deterioration of Mr. Biswas is symbolically emphasized by the mustiness of his bedroom, the "atmosphere of decay" in the house, and the frequent references to darkness: "the shop in darkness"; "the kitchen was always dark."

The Arrest of This Deterioration

Our critic goes on to say that the arrest of this deterioration is also symbolically represented: by the house's atmosphere of decay which is "held in check" by the unexpected resilience of the cracked and sagging walls of the shop. This arrest is further emphasized by imagery and symbolism in the chapter which follows. Green Vale is damp and close and dark; rotting leaves choke the grass gutters; on the trees half the leaves are dead, the others are a dead green. New leaves appear without any freshness about them: "they came into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they died." Yet the leaves on the trees never fall: "Death was forever held in check." The reference to the new leaves is gloomily predictive. Even at The Chase Mr. Biswas's defiance seems to have lost much of its early freshness. His gestures are now often made in a tired manner, and these gestures last only long enough to be frozen in frustration. The notion of death spreading from the roots of the trees suggests that there is some fatal deficiency in Mr. Biswas's creative urge and vague romantic longing. Later in the Green Vale chapter comes the symbolic suggestion that Mr. Biswas's condition is inescapable. Again and again, Naipaul's imagery emphasizes the relentlessness of the circumstances facing Mr. Biswas.

The Evocation of Darkness, Density, Etc.

When Mr. Biswas seems to have achieved some sense of "wholeness", his experience is associated with an ant whose collapsed wings were a burden to its body. Anand helps to remove these wings, and the ant "suddenly busy, suddenly deceptively whole, moved off towards the dark". Here we begin to think that Mr. Biswas has some chance of at least a qualified success—even after the

suggestion that his body is rotting. But the respite is brief. Without their wings the ants fall helplessly a prey to the black enemy. Naipaul's evocation of darkness, density, order, and inevitable death links Mr. Biswas's condition with the inescapable, suffocating quality of life in Hanuman House. Symbolically, this evocation suggests an inevitability of outcome which makes Mr. Biswas's struggle seem futile and absurd. Subsequently Mr. Biswas's death causes hardly a flutter. Only the *Trinidad Sentinel* reports it, and not with the headline Mr. Biswas had requested: "Roving Reporter Passes on." The headline which he gets is "Journalist Dies Suddenly", which is a statement cruelly impersonal and blunt. Even the indirect manner in which Naipaul records Mr. Biswas's death only helps to consign him to obscurity.

Superfluous Material in the Novel

This analysis of the structure of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is certainly a scholarly and stimulating one. But it makes no reference to the abundance of superfluous and dispensable material which the novel contains. The story lingers, and the pace of the narration is leisurely. The author has a propensity to dwell on incidental details and to expand events and episodes beyond the legitimate bounds. The author is carried away by his own exuberance and his talent for elaboration and extension of the facts.

“A House For Mr. Biswas”: The Principal Characters in the Novel

1. MR. MOHUN BISWAS

An Unlucky Person in Many Ways

Mr. Mohun Biswas is the central character in the novel. Round him the whole story of the novel revolves. The novel traces the story of Mr. Biswas's life from the time of his birth to the time of his death. The forty-six years of his life are for him a time of constant anxiety, recurrent set-backs, repeated failures, many rebuffs at the hands of human beings, of society, and of Fate. It is a story largely of failure, frustration, and futility. Mr. Biswas's acquiring a house of his own marks the culmination of his struggles in life. At the very time of his birth, some gloomy predictions are made about his future. He is born at the inauspicious hour of midnight; he is born in the wrong way; and he has six fingers. The view of the midwife is that the boy would eat up his own mother and father, while the pundit who is summoned the next morning says that the boy would grow up to be a lecher, a spendthrift, and possibly a liar as well. The pundit advises the family to keep the boy away from trees and water. The pundit also warns the family that the boy will have an unlucky sneeze. However, the boy, who is given the name of Mohun, does not grow up to be a lecher, or a spendthrift, or a liar though he does prove to be an unlucky person in many ways. He loses his father when he is only a few years old and, ironically enough, the father meets a watery death in an attempt to rescue the boy from a pond into which the boy is believed to have fallen while in actual fact the boy is safe and sound and is hiding under a bed at home. The boy has certainly eaten up his father.

His Love of Independence; and His Rebelliousness

Mr. Mohun Biswas receives his education at the local Canadian Mission School at a village called Pagotes where he has settled

down with his mother Bipti while his two brothers have been sent to live with a distant relative in a town called Felicity, and his sister Dehuti begins to work as a maid-servant in the household of Bipti's rich sister Tara and Tara's husband Ajodha. Mr. Biswas spends six years at school whereafter he is put under religious training with a pundit by the name of Jairam. He is unable to complete his religious training which was to lead to his becoming a pundit himself. For some time thereafter he works as an assistant to Ajodha's brother, Bhandat, at Ajodha's rum-shop. But luck does not favour him there also; and he becomes a sign-painter at the suggestion of an old school-mate by the name of Alec. While working at Hanuman House in his capacity as a sign-painter he feels attracted by a girl called Shama who is the daughter of Mrs. Tulsi, a widow who owns Hanuman House and a vast property besides. Mr. Biswas is "trapped" into a marriage with Shama, as he puts it. He had expected a rich dowry and separate residential accommodation from his mother-in-law, but he finds that his mother-in-law's plans about him are totally different. He is expected to live in Hanuman House as a dependant and to work in the Tulsi Store or at the Tulsi estate like the other sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi. Mr. Biswas is a young man with a good deal of self-respect, and he does not wish to forfeit his independence. There is a rebellious streak in his nature and he is not willing to submit to the dictatorship of Mrs. Tulsi and her brother-in-law Seth with whose active assistance she rules Hanuman House and all the inmates including her many daughters and their husbands. When it is suggested to him that he should take up a job on the Tulsi estate, he says that he would like "to paddle his own canoe" and that he would not give up his independence. He describes the Tulsis as "blood-suckers", and he says many other nasty things to say about the whole Tulsi clan and especially about Mrs. Tulsi, Seth, and the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi. Thus he comes into conflict with the Tulsi clan, and begins to struggle for liberation from their hold upon him. However, his efforts to lead an independent life fail. He has to run the Tulsi food-shop in the village of The Chase and, when that shop collapses, he is sent to work as a supervisor on the Tulsi estate at Green Vale. There he starts building a house of his own in order to have a feeling of independence, but he cannot complete the construction of the house on account of a shortage of money. At Green Vale he falls gravely ill and is carried to Hanuman House for treatment. On recovering from his illness, he decides to begin a new chapter in his life; and so he goes to Port of Spain to try his luck there. But even in Port of Spain he is compelled by circumstances to live in a house which Mrs. Tulsi had purchased there for her own residence. From this house he is made to shift to the Tulsi estate at Shorthills where again he builds a house of his own in order to liberate himself from the strangle-hold of Mrs. Tulsi. But this house catches fire, and Mr. Biswas has to go back to Port of Spain to live once again in Mrs. Tulsi's house. Eventually, after a furious quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi, he takes a loan from his uncle Ajodha and manages to buy a house of his own in

Sikkim Street in Port of Spain. The house is found to have many defects, and the repairs cost Mr. Biswas some additional expenditure. But at last he has become the owner of a house. Thus the story of the novel contains largely an account of Mr. Biswas's rebellion against Tulsidom and against the Tulsi code which crushes the individuality of everyone who comes into contact with the Tulsi clan or who comes under its influence. Mr. Biswas's rebellion does ultimately lead to his liberation from the Tulsi hold, but he achieves his triumph very late in life so that he is unable to enjoy his feeling of triumph for a long time. His premature death denies to him this pleasure.

His Love of Reading

Early in life Mr. Biswas develops a love of reading. First of all he gets interested in Bell's Standard Elocutionist, a book which he had borrowed from the school library but which he had not found it possible to return. He often reads this book. Then he becomes interested in the books of Samuel Smiles. He then feels attracted by the writings of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. Then the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli catch his attention. He goes on to devour all the novels which are available at the local bookstall. He buys a few scientific books also, though he does not derive much benefit from them. All this reading widens his mental horizon and increases his knowledge much beyond that of a man who has to run a food-shop or to supervise the work of labourers on an estate. This wide reading stands him in very good stead later in life. It is because of this wide and varied reading that he develops a habit of thinking and meditation. It is this literary background which enables him to get a job as a newspaper reporter and later as a Community Welfare Officer. It is true that all this reading fails to make a literary author of him. He fails as a writer of short stories, and he fails also to have his articles published in magazines and periodicals. But by virtue of his intellectual interests he can at least rise above the level of Govind and W.C. Tuttle, and even of Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, though Owad afterwards surpasses him in intellectual achievement. His literary background and his work as a journalist certainly add to his dignity in our eyes; and his stature as a character in the novel is also enhanced thereby.

As a Husband; the Element of Perversity in His Nature

Mr. Biswas's married life with Shama proves a failure. From the very first day of his marriage he realizes that he has been duped by the Tulsi family. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth have arranged the marriage at the registrar's office to save money. Mr. Biswas receives no dowry at all; and the Tulsi family, far from providing separate residential accommodation to him, want him to live as a dependant in Hanuman House and to work under their control. Whenever Mr. Biswas criticizes the Tulsi family, Shama takes their side, thus

coming into conflict with Mr. Biswas. Shama is openly contemptuous of his humble origin and she reminds him that he had come to the Tulsi home with no more clothes than could be hung on a single nail. At the same time there is a certain element of irrationality and perversity in Mr. Biswas's nature, as a result of which he goes out of his way to hurt Shama's feelings. He speaks to her in an offensive tone, using abusive words about her family. No woman can tolerate such criticism of her family; and Shama resents her husband's criticisms because she herself is a woman with a good deal of self-respect and has an independent mind. Mr. Biswas on his part feels keenly dissatisfied with the conditions of life in Hanuman House, and he vents his anger upon Shama. The result is that she remains distant in her relationship with him. She seldom asks him about the work he is doing, and he is cautious about revealing to her information which might later be used against him. He criticizes her brothers, her mother, and her uncle Seth. She urges him not to criticize her relations openly, saying : "You getting everybody against you. You don't mind. But what about me ? You cannot give me anything and you want to prevent everybody else from doing anything for me ?" When they move to The Chase, however, Shama tries to prove as helpful to Mr. Biswas as possible. He feels that she is instrumental in banishing silence and loneliness from the house where they have now taken up residence. She gives him many useful suggestions for running the Tulsi food-shop, and she begins to keep the accounts. They do not now quarrel very often, but their talk still remains impersonal and constrained. Shama creates an atmosphere of service and devotion to her husband, and Mr. Biswas finds this atmosphere very flattering. So when one day Shama suggests that they should hold a house-blessing ceremony, Mr. Biswas agrees even though he is not in favour of holding any such ceremony, but he agrees only after Shama has nagged him a good deal. Mr. Biswas does not at any stage give up taunting Shama about her family and her relations, and therefore their conjugal life with her never becomes happy for either of them. When they have shifted to Green Vale, she keeps paying frequent visits to Hanuman House and spending several days there on every visit. Even the birth of four children does not bring them very close to each other, though at Green Vale Mr. Biswas's attitude to her improves somewhat. On one occasion, for instance, he becomes violently angry with her and yet he wishes her to remain with him and not to go to Hanuman House as she is in the habit of doing after every quarrel. But, once again, in the course of a quarrel he hits her in the belly and asks her to go away to Hanuman House and take her children with her. Indeed, at no stage in the course of his life, does Mr. Biswas show any real love for Shama. It is true that his hostility to her stems from his general dislike of the Tulsi clan as a whole and what they stand for. But, if there had been no perversity in his nature, he could have adjusted himself to his circumstances and could have passed his married life with Shama peacefully even while retaining

his antagonism to and prejudice against the Tulsi family. It is only towards the end of the story, when Mr. Biswas has bought a house of his own, that some kind of mutual understanding develops between him and Shama. Tulsidom having already suffered a heavy blow by the defections of various members of the Tulsi clan, Shama now acquires a new loyalty to her husband and therefore it is only for the brief period which Mr. Biswas spends at his own house in Sikkim Street or in the hospital after getting his heart-attacks that he has any experience of a peaceful domestic life.

A Strong Streak of Morbidity in His Nature

There is a strong streak of morbidity in Mr. Biswas's nature. We first perceive this streak when he has settled down at The Chase and when he begins to have certain fears about his future. When he has moved to Green Vale, this morbidity deepens. Now he is often troubled by miscellaneous questionings and apprehensions. There comes a time when he begins to feel afraid of people, real people and imaginary people. Fear becomes the dominating emotion in his heart. He struggles against this feeling, but fails to conquer it. In fact, he now develops a mental sickness and becomes a psychopath. His sleep is often broken by bad dreams. His mind becomes so diseased that he even thinks of getting rid of his children Anand and Savi by killing them. One morning, for instance, he is haunted by visions in which he kills his children by stabbing them with an axe, or by poisoning them, or by strangling them, or by setting fire to them. Soon afterwards he feels that these visions were totally absurd, and he feels mentally fatigued. However, his fears about his future do not relax their hold upon his mind. When he moves into the new house which he has built at Green Vale, he hopes that he might be able to emerge from his morbid state of mind, but he still gets no relief from his fears. One night, when Anand is also staying with him at this new house, the boy is awakened by Mr. Biswas's jumping out of bed, screaming, and tearing his shirt as if he had been attacked by a column of red ants. When on another occasion in that house a storm has begun to blow, he urges Anand to repeat the words *Rama, Rama, Sita Rama*. But he himself derives no comfort from this recitation. On this occasion he falls seriously ill and has to be carried to Hanuman House for treatment. It is only after he has moved to Port of Spain that he is able to get rid of his morbid feelings and thoughts, though not completely even then.

His Unorthodox Ideas

Early in life Mr. Biswas develops unorthodox ideas. Even though he had got some religious training under the supervision of Pundit Jaiaram, he does not fall much under the influence of orthodoxy. Having spent several years under a Christian teacher by the name of Lal and having also become intimate with a Christian boy

by the name of Alec, he has unconsciously developed a near-cosmopolitan outlook. Afterwards, when he comes into contact with Misir and meets a missionary preaching the progressive ideas of Arya Samaj, he adopts those ideas and begins to propagate them even at Hanuman House. He even comes under the influence of Christianity when he comes into contact with a Christian woman through Misir. He often pokes fun at the conservatism of the Tulsi clan, all members of which are believers in the Sanatan Dharam. However, Mr. Biswas remains totally uninfluenced by Communist ideas which Owad had adopted and which Owad tries to propagate among the members of the Tulsi family living in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain.

As a Father

As a father Mr. Biswas proves a failure just as he proves a failure as a husband. His children do not feel any deep or real affection for him. They do not become attached to him in any real sense, and they do not feel any deep filial devotion towards him. He does try to please his daughter by giving her a present on the occasion of Xmas, though in doing so he annoys most members of the Tulsi family; but Savi's pleasure is shortlived because her mother, harassed by the taunts of her sisters, shatters the present (which is a doll's house) and throws it away. When Savi has to spend a week in his company at Green Vale, she does not feel very happy even though he tries his utmost to keep her amused by reading out to her from books. It is true that at one time Anand decides to stay with him instead of going to Hanuman House with his mother and the other children, but his stay there does not lead to the development of any genuine relationship between father and son. Subsequently, Mr. Biswas takes a good deal of interest in Anand's education and arranges for extra lessons for the boy in order to prepare him for the exhibition examination and, although Anand wins a scholarship, thus gladdening his father's heart, yet Anand is far from becoming devoted to his father. Even after Anand has gone abroad on a scholarship, his letters to Mr. Biswas do not show much affection because Anand has developed into a self-centred young man. Mr. Biswas is really unfortunate in this respect because, although he tries his utmost to win the affection and love of his children, he fails in his effort perhaps because he does not really know how to express his affection for them and perhaps also because he is himself a self-centred kind of person.

His General Incompetence

Mr. Biswas is a failure in dealing with people in general just as he is a failure in dealing with his wife and his children, apart from his failure in developing any meaningful relationship with the Tulsi clan in general. Mr. Biswas, despite his wide reading and his intellectual interests, is a man only of a mediocre ability. He is

not a very sociable kind of man and he does not possess any particular talent or gift to any marked degree. At The Chase he cannot run the Tulsi food-shop successfully because he does not know how to deal with the customers and because he is easily duped by a lawyer's tout who unnecessarily drags him into litigation which proves to be financially disastrous for him. At Green Vale he fails to win the loyalty or the goodwill of the labourers who remain hostile to him and who, after his departure from there, burn down the house which he had built. In fact, his stay at Green Vale proves to be the darkest period of his life. In Port of Spain he is unable to get on very well with the management of the *Trinidad Sentinel* after the departure of Mr. Burnett who was no doubt kindly disposed towards him. He is unable to see through the designs of the solicitor's clerk whose jerry-built house he buys at a huge cost. In fact, he is no judge of human nature, and he is incapable of forming any lasting friendships. He fails at every job which he undertakes. He fails as a shopkeeper, as an overseer at the Tulsi estate, as a writer of short stories, as a writer of magazine articles, as an investigator of the cases of deserving destitutes. Even his work as a Community Welfare Officer is found by him to be very irksome. In fact, Mr. Biswas can be described as a rolling stone, as a man with no steadiness in his purpose or ambition. In fact, he has no real ambition, though he certainly cherishes an ardent desire to see his children attaining high positions in life. Perhaps, his real ambition is to possess a house of his own, an ambition which is fulfilled at last, though partially (because the house is mortgaged).

His Sardonic Wit and His Keen Sense of Humour

One of the most striking qualities of Mr. Biswas is his fertile wit and his keen sense of humour. Even in the midst of a misfortune and even at the time of a crisis, his wit and his sense of humour never fail him, barring the period of deep gloom and morbidity which he spends at Green Vale. His wit is of a sardonic kind. He makes all kinds of sarcastic remarks about the members of the Tulsi family. He refers ironically to Mrs. Tulsi's two sons as the little gods, to Seth as the big boss, and to Mrs. Tulsi herself as the old queen, the old hen, the old cow, and finally as the she-fox. When Shama expresses her pride in her family, Mr. Biswas says to her : "Family? Family? This blasted fowl-run you call family?" He refers to Shama's brothers as monkeys; he describes Hanuman House as a zoo with many different kinds of animals living in it. He makes fun of the orthodox views which the Tulsi family holds; then he makes fun of the Tulsi family for holding orthodox religious ideas and at the same time allowing its sons to wear crucifixes which are a symbol of the Christian Roman Catholic faith. He makes fun of Mrs. Tulsi for having married off Shama in a registry office, and for sending her two little gods (namely her two sons) to a Roman Catholic College for their studies. He refers to Hari as "the constipated holy man".

He pokes fun at the house-blessing ceremony which Hari had performed at the Tulsi food-shop at The Chase and asks Shama if it is possible for her to invite Hari again to The Chase, this time to "un-bless" the house. When Seth one day asks him if the food-shop has become bankrupt, his reply is that Seth should wait for a little more time because, after all, only about four months have passed since Hari blessed it, thereby implying that, as a result of Hari's house-blessing ceremony, the shop would certainly go bankrupt though it will take a little more time to do so. Indeed, the sarcasms and witticisms of Mr. Biswas are a major source of comedy in this novel. By means of this gift of wit and humour, Mr. Biswas rises above all the other characters in the story and makes up to a great extent for his shortcomings and deficiencies.

A Buffoon ; An Absurd Man. His Life, a Tragedy

Mr. Biswas is undoubtedly the hero of the novel, in the sense of being its chief protagonist. But he does not have the heroic proportions, and is not a hero in the traditional sense of the word. He is a man of only average abilities ; he proves incompetent to perform the various jobs which he has to do ; and he is unable to judge the nature of those with whom he has to deal. In fact, he is a kind of Everyman. A hero stands head and shoulders above other people, but Mr. Biswas belongs to the category of the ordinary people. It would be more appropriate to call him an anti-hero because, while a hero rises to great heights of achievement even if he ultimately suffers defeat or is crushed by misfortune, Mr. Biswas achieves very little. Mr. Biswas's achievement consists in acquiring a house of his own and thus achieving the fulfilment of a life-long desire ; but on the whole his life is a tragedy. At Hanuman House he is regarded as a buffoon and a trouble-maker. There is no doubt that in some ways he is a buffoon ; he is certainly a clown who can make fun of himself as well as of others ; he is an absurd man, one early proof of his absurdity being the manner in which he unwittingly brings about the death of his father. But, though he is an absurd man, though he is an Everyman, and though he may even be called an anti-hero, he is not absolutely devoid of heroism.

A Hero Despite His Mediocre Abilities and His Failures

Mr. Biswas's heroism lies in the fact that he never throughout his life loses his integrity. From first to last, he retains his self-respect and his love of independence. In this respect he makes no compromise at all. His rebellion against Tulsidom is life-long even though at times he realizes the merits and admirable qualities of the Tulsi family. His resistance to the Tulsi stranglehold upon him symbolizes his inveterate love of freedom. He is a man far superior to Govind, to Hari, to W.C. Tuttle, to Seth, and to all the women-folk in the family, even though he is not much superior to the two Tulsi sons. He never feels happy as a dependant, or as a receiver of

charity. In fact, the grave illness which he suffers from at Green Vale is caused by this persistent and haunting sense of dependence on the Tulsi family and by his fear that this dependence may never come to an end. His fears about his future at Green Vale and his fears about the future of his children stem largely from this continuing dependence on the Tulsi family. It is only when he has bought a house of his own that he is liberated from this sense of dependence ; and he dies a contented man. In his premature death and in his many failures lies the tragedy of his life ; but in his capacity to preserve his self-respect, his integrity, and his love of independence lies his triumph. And his triumph lies also in his acquiring a house of his own at last.

2. MRS. TULSI

Her Matriarchal Role and Her Authority

Mrs. Tulsi is the head of the Tulsi clan living at Hanuman House in the village of Arwacas. She is a widow of a high social standing, and she owns a vast property left to her by her husband, who had died in a motor-car accident. When we meet her first in the story she is as laden with jewellery as Tara was when Tara had first been introduced to us. Mrs. Tulsi lacks Tara's sprightliness but has a more impressive personality. Her face, though not plump, is slack as if not getting enough exercise. Mrs. Tulsi is an orthodox Hindu woman who, in the course of the story, falls greatly under the influence of the alien western culture. As the head of the Tulsi clan, she plays a matriarchal role and, with the active help of her brother-in-law Seth, is able to exercise a tremendous authority over the household though, by the time we reach the end of the novel, this authority has been reduced almost to nil.

Her Shrewdness, Amounting to Cunning

The organization of the Tulsi house shows the important role of Mrs. Tulsi at Hanuman House, on her estate at Shorthills, and at her house in Port of Spain. Mrs. Tulsi keeps only one servant, a Negro-woman who is called "Blackie" by Seth and by Mrs. Tulsi herself, though everybody else in the house has to call her "Miss Blackie." Mrs. Tulsi's daughters and their children sweep the floors, wash the clothes, do the cooking, and serve in the Tulsi Store. Mrs. Tulsi's sons-in-law work, under Seth's supervision, on the Tulsi land ; they look after the Tulsi animals ; and they also render some service in the Tulsi Store. In return for these services, the Tulsi daughters and their husbands are given food, accommodation, and a little money ; their children are well looked after ; and they themselves are treated with respect by people outside because they are connected with the Tulsi family. Mrs. Tulsi had given birth to as many as fourteen daughters, besides two sons. Most of her daughters and their husbands live with her, though a few of the daughters, who

had married husbands with money and position, had followed the Hindu custom of living with the families of their husbands and who therefore do not form part of the Tulsi organization at Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi has become an adept in choosing husbands for her daughters. Generally she chooses young men of no means but of high castes, so that she can subsequently exercise full control over them. The choice of such husbands for her daughters also means that she need not spend much money at the time of the marriage or give much of a dowry. Her shrewdness in this respect finds a good illustration in the manner in which she gets her daughter Shama married to Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas comes of a poor family, but he is a Brahmin by caste. Mrs. Tulsi does not mind having another son-in-law of a poor background because she thinks that she would be able to save the expense of a traditional marriage and would at the same time be able to exercise her hold upon him just as she is exercising a hold upon Govind, Hari, and others. In order to persuade Mr. Biswas to marry Shama, she makes use of the brief note which Mr. Biswas had addressed to Shama expressing his liking for the girl and expressing also a desire to talk to her. Mr. Biswas is not really willing to marry Shama, but Mrs. Tulsi, ably assisted by Seth, is able to pressurize him into acquiescence. She then shows her shrewdness, which amounts almost to cunning, by arranging the marriage at the office of the registrar so that she may not have to spend any money on the traditional kind of marriage. Mr. Biswas gets no dowry, and he is given no separate residential accommodation which he had looked forward to. No wonder that subsequently Mr. Biswas describes his mother-in-law to Shama as a "she-fox."

Her Strategic Illnesses and Their Comic Effect

Mrs. Tulsi often faints. Whenever this happens, a complex ritual is performed by members of the family. One daughter immediately rushes to get Mrs. Tulsi's room, called the "Rose Room", ready to receive Mrs. Tulsi. Mrs. Tulsi is then taken to that room by her other daughters working under the supervision of Padma, Seth's wife. If Padma happens to be herself ill at the time, Mrs. Tulsi's widowed daughter Sushila takes her place. In the Rose Room, one daughter fans Mrs. Tulsi; two massage her legs; one pours bay rum into her hair and massages her forehead. The other daughters stand by, ready to carry out any instructions which Padma or Sushila may be pleased to give. Mrs. Tulsi's two sons also attend upon her at this time. All other activity in the house is suspended. Mrs. Tulsi's fainting fits are generally due to some indiscretion committed by one or the other of her several sons-in-law living in the house. One of her fainting fits, for instance, occurs when Mr. Biswas makes some unkind remarks about Mrs. Tulsi's elder son Shekhar's wearing a crucifix. Shekhar's wearing a crucifix shows the influence on him of the Roman Catholic religion despite the fact that Shekhar is a member of an orthodox Hindu family. Most often Mrs. Tulsi feigns a fainting fit. The whole family becomes greatly

alarmed whenever she complains of any ailment, though even her ailments are often feigned ones. In fact, her illnesses, which are feigned by her as an act of diplomacy or strategy, prove to be a source of much comedy in the novel. As she falls ill quite often, her room always smells of ammonia, bay rum, brandy, disinfectants, and a variety of medicines. There are a large number of bottles, jars, and glasses in her room. There is a bottle of smelling salts, a bottle of Sloan's Liniment, a bottle containing eye-drops and another containing nose-drops ; and so on. Sometimes she feigns illness only in order to enjoy the pleasure of being attended upon by all the inmates of the house and the feeling of importance. Her illnesses are also a means whereby she can put pressure on any recalcitrant son-in-law to agree to some proposal to which he might not agree otherwise.

Her Patronizing Attitude to Her Sons-in-law

Mrs. Tulsi speaks to her sons-in-law in a patronizing manner. For instance, when she attends the house-blessing ceremony at the food-shop of which Mr. Biswas has taken charge, she tells him that he has now come into the possession of some very nice little property. Mr. Biswas points out to her that the roof of the shop leaks during rains. Thereupon she says that the roof would not collapse and that in any case it does not rain all the time. When Mr. Biswas says that he needs a new kitchen in this house, she replies that the existing kitchen looks all right to her. When he says that he needs an extra room, she says that the gallery can be converted into an extra room if some sugar-sacks are hung on the posts at night and removed during the day, so that the gallery serves the purpose of an extra room at night and becomes a gallery again during the day. Mr. Biswas speaks to her in a sarcastic manner but she speaks very earnestly.

A Kind-Hearted Woman Despite Her Authoritarianism

Mrs. Tulsi is very particular that the Tulsi code of conduct should be observed by everybody living in Hanuman House. She therefore feels very annoyed when Mr. Biswas violates the family convention by giving to his daughter Savi a Christmas present while ignoring the other children in the house. She tells Mr. Biswas that she is in the habit of treating all the children uniformly, thereby implying that Mr. Biswas has committed a blunder by having treated a child of his own in a preferential manner. Mrs. Tulsi greatly resents Mr. Biswas's rebelliousness. While her other sons-in-law cooperate with her and with Seth fully, and they all work without complaining or grumbling, Mr. Biswas makes no secret of his dissatisfaction and displeasure with his life in this household. Mr. Biswas's sarcastic references to her, to her two sons, and to Seth therefore make him a kind of *persona non grata* (that is, a person who is not in favour with the authorities). When Mr. Biswas has committed an act of serious misconduct, thereby offending her younger son Owad, she and Seth take immediate action against him and decide to send him away to The Chase to run their food-

shop. In view of his misconduct, Mrs. Tulsi no longer thinks Mr. Biswas a fit person to continue living in Hanuman House. It must, however, be admitted that at no stage does she disown Mr. Biswas or any other member of the family. She is quick to forgive the erring members of her family. When Mr. Biswas falls gravely ill at Green Vale, he is brought to Hanuman House where he is properly looked after and nursed back to health. When Mr. Biswas has difficulty in finding accommodation in Port of Spain, Mrs. Tulsi accommodates him in her own house there; and she invites him to join her at Shorthills when she has herself moved to that place. She has the same benevolent attitude towards other members of her clan. Whenever any dependant of hers or any relative wishes to go to Port of Spain or to send their children to that city for educational purposes, she receives them and accommodates them in her house without raising any objection whatsoever. Her attitude may be rigid and authoritarian, but she never forgets her duty as a matriarch.

A Blend of Orthodoxy and Modernity

Mrs. Tulsi is greatly devoted to her two sons, Shekhar and Owad. After Shekhar has got married to a Christian woman, she goes and begins living in Port of Spain only to be able to look after her younger son Owad who is attending a college there. For the sake of her sons, she makes a compromise with the alien western culture even though by conviction she is a highly orthodox Hindu woman. She permits Shekhar to get married to a Christian woman and she encourages Owad to go abroad even though some of her relations regard foreign travel as a regrettable deviation from their orthodox culture. Thus with the passing of time Mrs. Tulsi becomes a curious blend of orthodoxy and modernity. When Owad returns after his eight-year stay in England, Mrs. Tulsi feels jubilant, and her joy knows no bounds even though at the time she is actually ill. She feels very proud of her son's achievements.

The Rift Between Her and Mr. Biswas

After Owad's return from England, he begins to live with his mother in her house in Port of Spain where many other members of the family including Mr. Biswas are also living. Soon a serious quarrel takes place between Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Biswas. There has been unpleasantness between her and Mr. Biswas on previous occasions also, but this time the quarrel leads to a rift. She loses her temper and tells him to go to hell, while he, never submissive or subservient, adopts the same insulting tone and asks whether he should go to hell in order to prepare the way for her. She then gives him notice to quit her house whereupon he declares that he regrets having stepped into her house in the first place. After this quarrel Mr. Biswas decides to quit Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain and manages to buy a house of his own even though he has to

take a heavy loan from his uncle Ajodha. Thereafter, we do not hear anything about Mrs. Tulsi.

A Symbol of Tyranny Despite the Basic Goodness of Her Heart

Mrs. Tulsi is basically not a bad woman at all, even though she produces an impression on our minds that she is a kind of tyrant. It is true that she loves power and wishes to be regarded as the supreme head of the family. But whenever there is any unpleasantness between her and Mr. Biswas or a quarrel between her and him, Mr. Biswas is at fault as much as she is. The discord between the two is due to the fact that, while she is too authoritarian, he is too independent-minded. She believes in strict discipline, while he wants freedom. She wants all her sons-in law to be subservient to her, and this position is not acceptable to Mr. Biswas. In spite of the basic goodness of her heart, Mrs. Tulsi is a symbol of the tyranny against which Mr. Biswas rebels. Her tyranny, which is supported by Seth, and Mr. Biswas's rebellion against that tyranny constitute the leading theme of this novel. Even though she is tyrannical, she can by no means be regarded as odious, as abhorrent, or as detestable.

3. SETH

Mrs. Tulsi's Right Hand

Seth is the brother of Mrs. Tulsi's dead husband. As such he enjoys a privileged position in Hanuman House. In fact, Seth stands only next to Mrs. Tulsi in power and patronage. Seth actively collaborates with Mrs. Tulsi in her exercising control over all the members of the Tulsi clan living in Hanuman House. He may be regarded as Mrs. Tulsi's right hand, not only because he helps her in maintaining her authority over the whole clan in Hanuman House, but also because he acts as her agent to look after the Tulsi animals, the Tulsi lands, the Tulsi shops, and the Tulsi estates.

A Self-Assertive, Dynamic Man With a Sense of Humour

When we meet Seth first he is wearing muddy bluchers* and a stained khaki topee;** and in the pocket of his sweated khaki shirt, he carries a black note-book and an ivory cigarette-holder. The bluchers and the ivory cigarette-holder are mentioned in the course of the novel several times, so that these two items become a hall-mark of this man. Seth is as shrewd a person as Mrs. Tulsi is; and he shows this shrewdness at the very outset when he lures Mr. Biswas into agreeing to marry Shama. Even though Mr. Biswas makes it clear that he has no money and no job, Seth dismisses this plea and says that the fact of Mr. Biswas being closely related to the rich Ajodha is itself enough evidence that Mr. Biswas is not a poor

*Bluchers are old-fashioned boots.

**This is the Hindustani word which means "cap".

fellow. Thus, Seth plays an important role in bringing about the marriage of Shama to Mr. Biswas. Thereafter, when Mr. Biswas begins to rebel against Tulsidom and when he indulges in sarcastic comments on Mrs. Tulsi, Seth, and Mrs. Tulsi's two sons, Seth reacts against Mr. Biswas's rebelliousness quite strongly. However, it must be admitted that Seth is not too solemn or stern or grim a person. He is a man with a strong sense of humour and, if Mr. Biswas can be sarcastic, Seth too possesses that talent. When it is reported to Seth that Mr. Biswas has called him the "big boss" in a mocking tone, and that Mr. Biswas has also used certain disparaging words for Mrs. Tulsi and her two sons, Seth takes Mr. Biswas to task but he does so in a laughing, jovial manner. When Mr. Biswas speaks admiringly of Arya Samaj, Seth makes certain sarcastic comments on the preacher Pankaj Rai who has come to Trinidad as a preacher on behalf of Arya Samaj. Seth says that he would not trust even his great grandmother with a man belonging to Arya Samaj. He says that these Aryans want to develop illicit sexual relations with all the women they happen to meet. He then tells Mr. Biswas that Pankaj Rai had taken certain liberties with the daughter-in-law of his host in Trinidad and had therefore been turned out of his host's house. Subsequently, Seth scolds Mr. Biswas for trying to preach the ideas of Arya Samaj to the inmates of Hanuman House. Seth ironically asks Mr. Biswas if the latter wants to see the Hindu girls being educated and then choosing their own husbands. Later, Mr. Seth, acting upon Mrs. Tulsi's wishes, drives Mr. Biswas away from Hanuman House and puts him in charge of the Tulsi food-shop at The Chase. Seth is certainly a self-assertive, dynamic man.

Not an Honest Man; His Crooked Methods

Seth is, strictly speaking, not an honest man. When the Tulsi food-shop under the charge of Mr. Biswas is about to go bankrupt, Seth suggests that Mr. Biswas should insure-and-burn the shop. What he means is that Mr. Biswas should have the shop insured and should then set fire to it deliberately in order to be able to claim compensation from the insurance company on the false plea that some mischief-maker like the village bully Mungroo had set fire to the shop or perhaps that the shop had caught fire accidentally. Subsequently, Seth himself gets the shop insured and has it burnt down. However, he does not himself keep the money which he obtains from the insurance company but hands it over to Mr. Biswas. Later in the novel we learn that Seth sets fire to one of his own lorries also in order to claim compensation from the company with which it was insured. But the fraud committed by Seth this time is discovered and he is charged with conspiracy. He is acquitted of the charge by the court but he loses much of his credit in the town. However, it would be wrong to regard Seth as a villain in the novel.

Not Wholly a Bad Man

Seth is not wholly a bad man. In fact, he may be described as a mixture of good and bad. When Mr. Biswas wants to build a house at Green Vale and is willing to pay for the land on which he would like to build the house, Seth dismisses the idea of Mr. Biswas having to pay anything for the land; and he asks Mr. Biswas to go ahead and build a house anywhere on the Tulsi land. His sense of humour is also one of his redeeming qualities. Even when he has to scold Mr. Biswas, he does so not in a stern manner but in a joking and bantering manner. When, for instance, he scolds Mr. Biswas because of the views of the Arya Samaj which Mr. Biswas seems to have adopted, Seth does so in a sarcastic manner. Earlier, when he rebuked Mr. Biswas for his having used bad language about the members of the Tulsi family, he did so in a sarcastic manner rather than in an indignant or angry tone. He felt amused rather than infuriated by Mr. Biswas's criticism of the Tulsi family.

His Rift with Mrs. Tulsi and the Decline in His Influence

In course of time his selfishness has the upper hand of his family loyalty. He becomes ambitious of acquiring property as an exclusive owner rather than continuing to share it with Mrs. Tulsi. Gradually he breaks away from Mrs. Tulsi and begins to live separately. Then there is some talk of his wishing even to buy Hanuman House in order to become its sole owner. But his social standing suffers a decline when he terminates his partnership with Mrs. Tulsi. When his wife Padma dies, it is suspected that he has poisoned her or done away with her in some other way and bribed the doctor not to have a *post mortem*. Of course, we do not really believe this rumour about his having murdered his wife, but it shows the extent to which the hostility of the Tulsi family towards him has increased because the rumour has emanated from the Tulsi household. Subsequently, as has already been pointed out, he burns one of his old lorries and claims compensation from the insurance company with which it was insured. He is charged with having hatched a conspiracy against the insurance company and, though he is acquitted by the court, he loses much money and much credit in the process. Thereafter he becomes more or less a passive figure in Arwacas. He now looks after his dingy food-shop, gives no threat to anybody, and no longer speaks of buying over Hanuman House. Later in the novel he appears as a pathetic figure because, when he goes to Port of Spain to join the members of the Tulsi household who have assembled to receive Owad on his return from England, he is ignored by everybody. Even Owad refuses to acknowledge his presence when he alights from the ship and sees Seth standing with a smile on his face and with his hand extended towards him. Seeing Owad's attitude of indifference and coldness towards him, Seth feels very humiliated. His hand drops slowly and the smile on his face

dies. There is now a big contrast between the Seth whom we met early in the story and the Seth whom we meet now.

4. SHAMA

Her Attitude to Her Husband

Shama is the girl who catches Mr. Biswas's attention at the Tulsi Store and who is then given in marriage to him by her mother Mrs. Tulsi and her uncle Seth. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth get Shama married to Mr. Biswas on the basis of the note which he had addressed to Shama and which he had put on the counter where she was attending to the customers in the Tulsi Store. Mr. Biswas was not very keen to marry her, but he is partly lured and partly trapped by her guardians into marrying her. Like her other sisters, Shama remains always loyal to the Tulsi family. This loyalty never wavers nor falters; and this loyalty is never superseded except at the very end of the story. When Mr. Biswas comes into conflict with the Tulsi family, Shama always sides with the family rather than with her husband. Indeed, her devotion to the Tulsi family is her most striking trait. She becomes loyal to her husband only when the Tulsi family has begun to disintegrate, and when her continuing devotion to it seems meaningless. As a wife she proves to be a source of great annoyance to Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas comes into conflict with the Tulsi family immediately after his marriage because he finds that he is expected to live in Hanuman House as a dependant of the Tulsi family and to work in the service of this family like the other Tulsi sons-in-law. He rebellion against the Tulsi family displeases not only the two heads of the family but Shama also. Shama too expected that her husband would fall in line with the other Tulsi sons-in-law but she finds, to her disappointment, that he is fast emerging as a trouble-maker at Hanuman House. When Mr. Biswas speaks to her about her mother, her uncle Seth, and her two brothers in a mocking tone, she tells him that nobody had particularly asked him to get married into the Tulsi family. When he says to her that he hopes to spit on some members of her family, she retorts that he should regard himself as lucky because nobody from her family would bother to spit on any member of his family. When one day he complains that he is not at all happy to have got married into the Tulsi family, she points out that it is only after having married into this family that he has been eating three square meals a day. She adds that he is now unhappy because, having a full stomach, he has begun to feel uneasy. When on another occasion he compares Hanuman House to a zoo and her two brothers to monkeys, she retorts that he is a "barking puppy dog" in this zoo. On another occasion, when he finds fault with her family, she says that he had come to Hanuman House with no more clothes than he could be hung upon a single one-inch nail. When she is forced to quit Hanuman House because Mr. Biswas has been asked to move from this place

to The Chase in order to take charge of the Tulsi food-shop there, she feels miserable and blames him for being responsible for her having to leave Hanuman House. She says to him : "You wanted this. You wanted to paddle your own canoe." When she suggests a house-blessing ceremony at the food-shop and he shows his reluctance, she starts nagging him till he has to yield to her wishes. Her persistence overcomes his objections to the ceremony. Later, when he protests against his having been described by her family as a labourer to the authorities who issued the birth-certificate of his child Savi, Shama tells him that he is, after all, a labourer and not a shop-proprietor as he thinks, because the shop belongs not to him but to Mrs. Tulsi. Shama accepts the names which are suggested by her family for her children and, though Mr. Biswas strongly protests against his children being given their names by Seth or by others in her family, she simply ignores his protests. When Mr. Biswas and Shama have moved to Green Vale, their quarrels continue and the chief reason for these quarrels is that Mr. Biswas does not stop criticizing the Tulsi family and continues to make sarcastic remarks about its various members. Whenever there is a quarrel between the two, Shama leaves him and goes to Hanuman House, taking the children with her, and she stays there till a reconciliation takes place. It is generally he who seeks a reconciliation because he knows that he himself had chiefly been responsible for the quarrel. On one occasion she annoys him greatly by shattering the doll's house which Mr. Biswas had given to their daughter Savi as a Christmas present. As a protest against this action of Shama's he takes Savi away with him to Green Vale. Subsequently, Shama explains to him, with tears in her eyes, the reason why she had broken the doll's house. Although there are frequent quarrels between Shama and Mr. Biswas, it is not to be supposed that she is an ill-tempered or aggressive woman. The quarrels takes place simply because Mr. Biswas is relentless in his sarcastic comments on the Tulsi family while Shama cannot tolerate his frequent attacks upon it. After the Tulsi family has broken up, and Mr. Biswas has bought a house of his own, her attitude to him undergoes a change. Now Mr. Biswas acknowledges the change in Shama and greatly appreciates it. Now he no longer hurts her feelings but is generally guided by her advice.

A Self-Assertive Woman with a Sarcastic Wit

As may have become clear from the above account, Shama is no dummy. She is a self-assertive woman. She has her self-respect and she has an independent mind too. If she had been a submissive or servile type of woman, she would not have clashed with her husband at any time. But she is not a nonentity. In addition to being a self-confident woman, she possesses a sarcastic wit also. She may not be able to match her husband in delivering sarcastic remarks, but she does not lag far behind him. Some of her witty retorts to Mr. Biswas have already been noted above. On one

occasion, after having left Hanuman House, ostensibly not to come back, Mr. Biswas does come back, whereupon she expresses her surprise at his return and asks him if he has come back because he had become tired of catching crabs in Pagotes whither he had gone. In fact, there is hardly an occasion on which we find her at a loss for words to reply to a remark made by Mr. Biswas. She has always a ready answer to whatever he may have to say.

An Efficient and Industrious Woman

Shama is a very efficient and painstaking woman. None of the Tulsi daughters is slack or sluggish in the performance of her duties. Shama rises to the occasion at all times. As a mother, she looks after her children very well. She neither pampers the children nor is too severe with them. She gives them all her affection but she does not hesitate to flog them whenever necessary. She flogs Savi when Savi proves to be unreceptive and is unable to tie her shoe-laces despite repeated demonstrations of how the thing is to be done. Later, she flogs Anand when Anand proves to be recalcitrant on one occasion. She shows her efficiency as a housewife when she organizes the house-blessing ceremony. Even Mr. Biswas feels convinced of her efficiency on this occasion. Being determined to do things well, she engages three labourers to work for three days to put up a large tent in the yard, and she sees to it that neither expense nor pains are spared in making the arrangements to the satisfaction of everybody. It is true that the children misbehave in the course of the ceremony and cause a lot of annoyance to Mr. Biswas, but Shama, being the hostess on this occasion, cannot take a harsh attitude towards them. She proves very helpful to her husband by suggesting to him how he should keep the accounts at the food-shop and how he should deal with his customers. If Mr. Biswas suffers a heavy financial loss by getting involved in litigation with one of his customers, it is because he had not consulted Shama with regard to the action which he took against that customer. In fact, Mr. Biswas does inwardly recognize the fact that Shama, the house-keeper, the mother, and the helpmate, is a different woman from the Shama whom he had married and who at Hanuman House had merely behaved like a prankster. Of course, Shama is not very different from her other sisters. She shares with her other sisters the tendency to feel happy at a birth or a marriage, to feel distressed at an illness or a hardship, and to feel grieved at a death. She certainly expects life to follow this established pattern of joy, misfortune, hardship, and death. For Shama and her sisters and for many other women too, ambition is a series of negatives : not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, or widow. And yet Shama has an individuality of her own which her other sisters do not have. Shama is capable of taking decisions. When she can live at The Chase no longer, she tells her husband so, and she then compels him to accept the new job which Seth offers to him. The new job takes Mr. Biswas to Green Vale and

when, after a prolonged stay at that place, Mr. Biswas falls ill, it is Shama who gives the order that all their belongings should be removed from Green Vale and brought to Hanuman House, because she has taken the decision that they would go back to Green Vale no more. This does not, however, mean that she can over-rule her husband. He is too independent-minded to heed her advice or opinion ; but there are certainly occasions when she plays a decisive role. She prevails upon Mr. Biswas to have a house-blessing ceremony at Green Vale before Mr. Biswas starts the construction of his own house there, despite the fact that Mr. Biswas had opposed even the first house-blessing ceremony which had taken place at The Chase. Shama again proves her efficiency when, living in her mother's house in Port of Spain, she maintains the accounts and collects the rents from her mother's tenants. Here she is even able to evict tenants who do not pay their rents. In fact, she becomes a terror to her mother's tenants. As a housewife she is capable of exercising economy. For instance, while living in Port of Spain, she spends very little money on herself. She manages to meet all her own needs of clothing with the gifts she receives every Christmas from her mother. Her bodices become patched on the breasts and under the arms and, although Mr. Biswas protests against this kind of economy, she persists in it. And Shama is not simply a housewife or a mother. She is capable even of intelligent conversation with strangers. When Miss Logie takes Mr. Biswas and his family on a trip to a sea-resort, Shama talks to her garrulously and intelligently. In the course of this conversation she gives expression to her opinions about the new constitution, about the proposed federation, about immigration, about India, about the future of Hinduism, and about the education of women. She does make grammatical mistakes while speaking to Miss Logie because she does not have enough command of the English language, but she shows that she is not an entirely ignorant woman. In fact, as both Mr. Biswas and Anand discover at different times, Shama had attended a good school and had been corresponding regularly with a pen-pal. She has certainly been brought up well in the Tulsi household.

Her Acceptance of the Inevitable

Towards the end of the novel, when Mr. Biswas has agreed to pay the sum demanded by the solicitor's clerk for the house in Sikkim Street, Shama expresses her displeasure at the transaction. She is shocked to learn that an amount of five thousand five hundred dollars has to be paid for the house. She therefore says to Mr. Biswas : "You mad ! You mad ! You hanging a millstone around my neck." She reminds him that he is still paying the instalments against the loan which he had taken for the purchase of the car, and she reminds him also that he does not hold a permanent job with the government. But Mr. Biswas's mind is already made up. Subsequently, when she and the children are taken by Mr. Biswas to be shown

the house in Sikkim Street, they all discover several defects in the building. But now Shama faces the inevitable with a stoic calm. She now simply says that it seems that a few repairs have to be carried out before they can move into this house. After they have moved into the house, she accepts the position and adjusts herself to the change. Subsequently, when Mr. Biswas dies, she exhibits the same stoic calm. Perhaps Shama has been somewhat irrational in her excessive loyalty to the Tulsi family, and perhaps she has sometimes been at fault in her quarrels with her husband ; but she is a woman whom we can admire and respect for her qualities.

The Minor Characters in “A House For Mr. Biswas”

1. TARA

An Energetic and Capable Woman

Tara is Bipti's sister, and therefore Mr. Biswas's aunt. She is introduced to us when Mr. Biswas's father has met a watery death and when she comes to Bipti's house to offer her condolences. But Tara does not come just to sympathize with her sister in the latter's bereavement. She comes and at once takes charge of the house and undertakes the responsibility of preparing for the funeral of the dead Raghu. She is wearing a lot of jewellery but, in spite of that, she proves herself to be an energetic and capable woman. In fact, she leaves the mourning to Bipti and arranges everything else. She has brought her own pundit who functions under her instructions ; and she has also brought a photographer to take a picture of the mourners. She urges Bipti's children to behave with dignity on the occasion and to keep out of the way.

Her Helpfulness to Bipti and Bipti's Children

After the funeral, Tara suggests that Dehuti should go with her and live in her house. In Tara's house, Dehuti is expected to learn manners, acquire graces, and prepare herself for marriage. At the same time, Dehuti would be working in Tara's house as a kind of domestic servant. Bipti agrees to send Dehuti with Tara to the latter's house. While Bipti and her family have been living in a village called Parrot Trace, Tara lives with her husband at a place called Pagotes. However, before Tara leaves for her own house, taking Dehuti along with her, she asks Bipti how much money her late husband Raghu has left to her. Bipti does not have the least notion whether Raghu has left any money at all. Tara and Bipti

then make a search for Raghu's money in the house but find nothing. When after some time Bipti finds it impossible to continue living in her hut with her children because of some harassment by her neighbours, she too moves to Pagotes with her youngest son, Mr. Biswas, while her two older sons are sent by her to a distant relative living in the town of Felicity. Bipti and Mr. Biswas then begin to live on Tara's bounty, though not in Tara's house but with some of the dependent relatives of Tara's husband in a back trace, far from the Main Road. Here, when Mr. Biswas has to be admitted to a school and Bipti needs a birth-certificate in respect of the boy, it is Tara who takes Bipti to the local solicitor who arranges the required birth-certificate, charging his usual fee for the service rendered. And it is Tara who puts Mr. Biswas under the charge of Pundit Jairam who is required to groom and train Mr. Biswas to become a pundit. Tara believes that, being a Brahmin, Mr. Biswas should prepare himself for the vocation of a pundit. When, after a time, Mr. Biswas comes back, having been driven away by Pundit Jairam, Tara does not feel annoyed with him as was expected. On the contrary, she tries this time to establish him in her husband's liquor business and sends him to her husband's rum-shop to work as an assistant to her husband's brother Bhandat who is in charge of that shop. At this time Mr. Biswas learns that his sister Dehuti, who was living in Tara's household as a dependent relative and as a maidservant, had run away with one of Tara's boy-servants. Tara had felt so annoyed with Dehuti because of the disgrace which the girl had brought to her that she had vowed never to have anything to do with Dehuti in future and not even to talk to her.

Her Kind-heartedness

Tara is a kind-hearted woman who helps Mr. Biswas at all times. Her kind-heartedness also is seen in her taking in Bhandat's two sons and keeping them in her own house when Bhandat has left them and gone to live with his mistress in Port of Spain. In Tara's home, the two sons of Bhandat grow up in great comfort. Later, when Mr. Biswas has got married but has received no dowry at all, he goes to meet Tara and tells her about his predicament. Tara at once goes to Hanuman House in order to find out why Mr. Biswas had so shabbily been treated by the Tulsi family. But at Hanuman House she is shown the love-note which Mr. Biswas had written to Shama and is told that it was a love marriage and that therefore no dowry had been thought to be necessary. Tara then suggests that Mr. Biswas should go back to his wife at Hanuman House. Years later, Mr. Biswas goes to Tara's house in order to ask Tara's husband Ajodha for a loan because Mr. Biswas wants to build a house of his own on the Tulsi estate at Green Vale. However, he gets no opportunity to make his request for the loan. On this occasion also Tara treats him with great warmth and hospitality. When he is leaving, she gives him a bagful of oranges for his children. On this occasion she also informs him that Ajodha's two nephews (the sons

of Bhandat) are proving to be somewhat difficult because they want money from Ajodha all the time, thus irritating him. Besides, she says, the two nephews are spreading all sorts of stories about Ajodha.

Afflicted With Asthma

It is many years later that we again hear about Tara. She is now afflicted with asthma. Ajodha has now built a new house in Pagotes and has decorated it well. Subsequently, when Mr. Biswas wants to buy a house of his own in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, he goes to Tara and Ajodha in order to get a loan of four thousand dollars from them. This time he is able to ask for the loan, and he gets it.

2. AJODHA

Interested in a Newspaper Column Dealing With Diseases

Ajodha is Tara's husband, and therefore Mr. Biswas's uncle. He is described as a thin man with a thin face which can express kindness rather than warmth. When Mr. Biswas meets Ajodha for the first time, he does not feel comfortable because he does not find Ajodha to be a warm-hearted man. But, of course, Mr. Biswas is mistaken in his initial judgment of his uncle who subsequently proves to be quite an affectionate kind of man. During his visits to Ajodha's house Mr. Biswas is often called upon by Ajodha to read out to him a newspaper column of which Ajodha is particularly fond. This newspaper column has the heading "That Body of Yours," and it deals everyday with a different disease of the human body. Ajodha can read himself also, but he thinks it more dignified to engage somebody else to read out this column to him. He listens with gravity, concern, and alarm when the column is read out to him. Ajodha never loses his taste for this column throughout his life. In later years, Mr. Biswas's son Anand reads out the same column to Ajodha, though not on a regular basis.

His Strong Sense of Humour, and His Boisterousness

Ajodha is a man with a great sense of humour. He can enjoy a hearty laugh and can even become boisterous in his talk. When, for instance, Mr. Biswas describes the misdeemeanour of which he had been guilty in Pundit Jairam's house, Ajodha laughs in a high-pitched manner and asks Mr. Biswas to tell him exactly what had happened. The embarrassment felt by Mr. Biswas on that occasion provides much pleasure to Ajodha. It is at this stage in Mr. Biswas's life that Tara sends him to the rum-shop being managed by Ajodha's brother Bhandat. The rum-shop had been Ajodha's first business venture; and this shop had provided the money to Ajodha for some of his subsequent business ventures. When Ajodha finds that Mr. Biswas has developed a love of reading, he urges the boy

to persuade the two sons of Bhandat also to take to reading. Ajodha is a very prosperous businessman owning a few buses also. After his dismissal from the rum-shop, Mr. Biswas is offered work as a bus-conductor on one of Ajodha's buses, and Mr. Biswas works for some time in this capacity also. When Mr. Biswas comes to Ajodha's house and talks to Tara about the manner in which he has got married, Ajodha again has a hearty laugh. He describes Mr. Biswas as the "married man," and his manner at this time shows a mixture of pleasure and malice. Again and again he refers to Mr. Biswas as the "married man," thus poking fun at the boy. When, after visiting Hanuman House, Tara comes and tells Mr. Biswas that the Tulsi family had showed her the love-letter which he had written to Shama, Ajodha shrieks: "Love-letter! Mohun!" Thus Ajodha enjoys the whole situation of Mr. Biswas having written a love-letter and having then been lured into a marriage which had brought him no dowry at all. Ajodha now urges Mr. Biswas to go back to his wife. "Go back and get your wife," says Ajodha.

The Tulsi Family, Antagonistic to Ajodha

Ajodha is not much in favour with the Tulsi family. In fact, there is a kind of subdued antagonism between Tara-Ajodha and the Tulsis. The Tulsis perform *pūja* everyday and celebrate every Hindu festival. They regard Ajodha as a man who pursues wealth and comfort and modernity and who has alienated himself from religion. Ajodha and Tara on their part regard the Tulsis as "squalid" and they make it clear that they consider Mr. Biswas's marriage into the Tulsi family to be a great misfortune for Mr. Biswas.

A Mockery

Ajodha is truly a mocker who pokes fun at others. On one of Mr. Biswas's visit to Ajodha house, Ajodha asks: "How many children has the married man got now? Seven, eight, a dozen?" Ajodha has a good laugh at Mr. Biswas's cost but at the same treats the young man hospitably. When a servant brings a glass of milk for Ajodha, Ajodha orders the servant to bring a glass for Mohun also. He then tells Mr. Biswas that milk is a food in itself, especially when it is fresh. He goes on to say that Mr. Biswas does not seem to him to be keeping good health. He giggles and says that Mr. Biswas is acquiring a paunch,* and he then pokes Mr. Biswas's belly with his finger. Ajodha expresses the view that Mr. Biswas's belly is soft like that of a woman, while actually the belly of a healthy man should be hard like Ajodha's own. Ajodha then also makes fun of his nephew Rabidat for having a fat and soft belly.

*Paunch—belly; stomach. (But the idea here is that Mr. Biswas has a protruding belly which is not a good sign.)
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Ajodha next mocks at Rabidat for being wasteful in spending money. "I don't know what you do with your money," says Ajodha to his nephew. He also then says in a mocking tone that, if he had not taken Rabidat out of the gutter, Rabidat would have been nowhere. Ajodha's taunt brings tears into Rabidat's eyes. Mr. Biswas had come on this occasion to ask for a loan from Ajodha because he was planning to build a house at Green Vale, but Ajodha is so boastful and so talkative that Mr. Biswas gets no opportunity at all to make his request. Ajodha now advises Mr. Biswas to take plenty of vitamin C. He also suggests that Mr. Biswas should take Sanatogen. Says he: "You know what you should do. Mohun? You should take Sanatogen. Not one bottle. Take the full course. You don't get any benefit unless you take the full course." A little later Ajodha loses his temper with Rabidat; and afterwards Tara explains to Mr. Biswas that Ajodha had got into a temper because his nephews are always asking him for money.

His Business Problems

Years later, Mr. Biswas again visits Ajodha and Tara, this time taking his children with him. Ajodha and Tara are as hospitable to Mr. Biswas as they had been previously. Ajodha makes arrangements for the children to visit the cinema, and then he arranges an excursion for them. The children enjoy their visit so much that they make it a habit to visit Ajodha and Tara every week. In the course of these visits by Mr. Biswas and his children, Ajodha speaks to Mr. Biswas privately of his business problems. When Mr. Biswas is working as a newspaper reporter, Ajodha tells him that he is not getting the contracts for which he had applied. He wants that Mr. Biswas should write an article about those contracts which are in the hands of the Local Road Board. He then complains that he has not been granted a permit to import diesel lorries. He wants that Mr. Biswas should find out why he is not getting that permit. And he wants Mr. Biswas to do much more in connection with his business problems.

Attached to His Nephews

Ajodha is deeply attached to his nephews, Jagdat and Rabidat, both of whom have been living in his house ever since their father left them. Although the nephews are almost insolent towards Ajodha, he cannot do without them. He says that he needs them in his business because he cannot trust strangers. Besides, he needs them even more because he is afraid of being alone.

His Amusing Remarks About Mr. Biswas's Car

When Mr. Biswas pays a visit to Ajodha and Tara after buying a new car, Ajodha as usual makes fun of Mr. Biswas, this time with reference to the car which he has purchased. Mr. Biswas has bought a Prefect car which is a small and light vehicle. Ajodha describes the car as "cardboard" and warns Mr. Biswas to be care-

ful while driving it because there is a danger that the wind might blow it off the road. Mr. Biswas has a feeling that even Ajodha is jealous of him over his purchase of a car. But it is not really jealousy which makes Ajodha ridicule Mr. Biswas's car. Ajodha is just in the habit of making fun of people and of things. Towards the end of the story we are told that Mr. Biswas obtains a loan of four thousand dollars from Ajodha in order to be able to buy a house of his own. Of course, Ajodha is business-like in giving the loan because he lends the money subject to certain conditions. Mr. Biswas has to pay eight per cent interest on it, and the loan is repayable in five years. Even so, we appreciate Ajodha's spirit of accommodation.

3. BIPTI

Mr. Biswas's Mother : A Rather Incompetent Woman

Bipti is Raghu's wife, the woman who gives birth to Mr. Biswas. Bipti already had three children, Prasad, Pratap, and Dehuti before giving birth to Mr. Biswas. Bipti had not been having a smooth or harmonious life with her husband. Before the birth of Mr. Biswas, she had had another quarrel with her husband and had therefore gone away to her parents' house ten miles away. And it was there that Mr. Biswas was born. Bipti gives us the impression of being a rather incompetent kind of woman. After the death of her husband, it is Bipti's sister Tara who takes charge of all Bipti's affairs. It is Tara who organizes everything relating to the funeral of Raghu. Bipti's own role on this occasion is that of the chief mourner. Subsequently, Bipti finds herself helpless against some of the neighbours who harass her and her children. The consequence of this helplessness is that Bipti sells her hut and land and moves from Parrot Trace (where she had been living with her husband) to Pagotes where Tara offers her some accommodation in one of her husband's houses.

Her Attitude Towards Mr. Biswas, and His Towards Her

Bipti is a woman completely lacking in any initiative or in the spirit of enterprise. Even to get a birth certificate for Mr. Biswas she has to obtain Tara's help. It is Tara who tries to establish Mr. Biswas in life, though Tara's efforts come to nothing. Every time Mr. Biswas returns home disappointed, Bipti receives him without any enthusiasm. She keeps telling Mr. Biswas that all the unfortunate predictions which the pundit had made about his future are proving to be true. She keeps grumbling that she has had no luck with her children and that all her children have proved to be ungrateful to her. When Mr. Biswas gets married to Shama, Bipti feels delighted. Now she says that she had always known that her son Mr. Biswas would never let her down. She says that she had always felt that he would marry into a good family. She says that she can

now die happily. She puts on her best clothes and pays a visit to Hanuman House from where she returns in a mood of great jubilation because of Mrs. Tulsi's warm reception of her. Years later, when Mr. Biswas is living with his family in his own house at Short-hills, he sends for Bipti. There has never been much of filial love in Mr. Biswas's heart for his mother. However, his sense of duty as her son compels him to invite her to come and stay with him and his family. When she comes, he is extravagantly affectionate, though Bipti remains calm. It is as if the relationship between them were not a very close one. Bipti now helps Shama with the house work, and she does some work on the Tulsi land also. Shama is quite respectful towards Bipti. However, Bipti does not stay with Mr. Biswas for a long time. Later in the novel, when Mr. Biswas and his family are living in Port of Spain, news comes of the death of Bipti. Mr. Biswas goes to attend his mother's funeral, taking his family along with him. It is now that Mr. Biswas realizes what a great asset a mother is to her son. He is now oppressed by a sense of loss : not of present loss, but of something missed in the past. Subsequently Mr. Biswas composes a poem in memory of his mother and reads it out to a literary gathering.

Bipti is a pathetic figure in the novel.

4. RAGHU

His Miserliness; and His Quarrels With His Wife

Raghu is Mr. Biswas's father with whom Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti often quarrels because of Raghu's miserliness. Just before Mr. Biswas's birth, Bipti has had another quarrel with Raghu and, as a consequence of this quarrel, she has left her house and gone to her parents' home in another village. There Bipti tells her parents the old story of Raghu's miserliness, how he keeps a check on every cent which he gives her, how he counts every biscuit in the tin, and how he would walk ten miles rather than pay a penny to travel by a cart. Raghu is believed to be hoarding money, though nobody knows where he hides his savings. It is thought that he is burying his money in the ground somewhere, and that he is possibly the richest man in the village. This kind of talk has an alarming effect on Raghu who, in order to counter it, begins to increase his austerities.

Raghu's Fear of Mr. Biswas's Sneeze

Soon after the birth of Mr. Biswas, Raghu goes to the house of his parents-in-law in order to see the newly-born child. However, in accordance with the instructions given by the pundit he is not permitted to see the child just then. He is asked to come after twenty-one days, and he is told that even then he would not be actually shown the face of the child but only the reflection of that face in coconut oil. Accordingly he comes after twenty-one days and

is shown the child's face as reflected in a plate filled with oil. When the child grows up, his parents have to take special precautions in order to ward off the misfortunes which had been predicted by the pundit. Mr. Biswas's sneeze is believed to be especially unlucky. Raghu's personal experience confirms this view. Whenever Raghu is about to leave the house to go to work, he gives up the idea of going out if at that moment Mr. Biswas happens to sneeze. On one occasion, when he ignores Mr. Biswas's sneeze and goes out, he meets an accident and suffers serious injuries to his leg. Raghu's comment on this occasion is: "This boy will make us all paupers." Raghu speaks these words from a deep fear in his mind. He is terribly afraid of becoming destitute. He keeps saving as much money as he can, and he deprives his family of many things which they need in the normal course; but he still has an apprehension that he might be reduced to a state of extreme poverty.

Drowned, While Trying to Trace His Son in the Pond

Raghu is greatly devoted to his family, despite his miserliness and his refusal to give them the required money with which they could meet their needs. He is a very good swimmer, and every Sunday morning he takes his two elder sons, Pratap and Prasad, to swim in a stream not far off. Mr. Biswas has to be left at home on these occasions because the pundit had given a warning that Mr. Biswas should be kept away from water. When, one day, it is reported that Mr. Biswas and the calf which had been entrusted to his care have probably slipped into the village pond and got drowned. Raghu at once jumps into the pond in order to make a search for his son. In the course of this diving operation, he does manage to bring out the dead body of the calf though he is not able to trace his son. He dives again into the water, despite the offer made by another man called Lakhan who, being also a good swimmer and diver, has got ready to search for Mr. Biswas in the water. Raghu's view is that it is the duty of the boy's father to take the risk involved in diving. The second time, when Raghu dives into the water, he himself gets drowned. All this time the boy, Mr. Biswas, has been hiding under his father's bed at home, perfectly safe and sound. In this way part of the prophecy made by the pundit has been fulfilled. The pundit had said that the boy would eat up his father and his mother. There is much pathos in the episode of Raghu's drowning, and yet there is a comic touch to this episode because, while Raghu has dived into the water to look for his son, the son is safe and sound at home. The comedy here arises from the incongruity or the irony of the situation.

5.6. PRATAP AND PRASAD

Early Life and Work

Pratap and Prasad are Mr. Biswas's two elder brothers. During their boyhood their father Raghu takes them daily to a

stream not far off from their house to train them in swimming. Raghu does not take Mr. Biswas with him to the stream because the pundit had warned Raghu and Bipti to keep Mr. Biswas away from water and also from trees. Pratap and Prasad begin working on the sugarcane estates when they are still youngsters, even though the law does not permit boys of their ages to work in the fields. When they are still in their teens, the two boys have developed adult mannerisms. They have already begun to speak with blades of grass between their teeth ; they drink noisily and sigh, passing the back of their hands across their mouths ; they eat enormous quantities of rice, patting their bellies and belching ; and every Saturday they stand in the queue to draw their pay. Their job is to look after the buffaloes which draw the carts loaded with sugarcane. The buffaloes in their leisure time enjoy themselves in the muddy pool not far from the sugar factory ; and so Pratap and Prasad have to move all day in the mud among the buffaloes. When the two boys come home, their legs are covered with buffalo mud. After the death of Raghu, the Biswas family gets scattered. Under the new domestic arrangement, Pratap and Prasad are sent to the distant town of Felicity, in the heart of the sugar-estates. At Felicity they are trained in estate work, being too old to learn anything else.

The Two Men Married, and Settled in Life

Later in the story we learn from Ramchand that Pratap has got himself into a mess because of his strange habit of buying donkeys. The last two of the donkeys bought by Pratap had died, and Pratap had suffered a heavy loss. We also learn from Ramchand that Prasad is now looking for a wife. Some time afterwards we are informed that both Pratap and Prasad have got married. Pratap is married to a tall handsome woman who is giving birth to a child every eighteen months ; while Prasad is married to a woman of horrible ugliness, a woman who is at the same time barren and incapable of bearing children. Years later, when Mr. Biswas is recovering from his nervous breakdown at Hanuman House, both Pratap and Prasad visit him in order to inquire about his health. At this visit the two brothers give each child in the Tulsi a penny as an act of grace, but having under-estimated the number of children at Hanuman House they end up by distributing only half-pennies. They talk to Mr. Biswas a good deal about the kind of work they have been doing. They also say that on the night of the storm they had both seen certain signs indicating that something was wrong with Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas listens to his talkative brothers without much interest. However, he inquires about the welfare of their families as a matter of courtesy. The two brothers of Mr. Biswas do not appear again in the course of the story. Indeed, they have no role to play in the novel.

7.8. DEHUTI AND RAMCHAND

Dehuti's Elopement With a Servant Ramchand

Dehuti is the daughter of Raghu and Bipti, and the sister of Pratap, Prasad, and Mr. Biswas. After the death of Raghu, Dehuti is taken away by her aunt Tara to Pagotes, with a promise that Tara would maintain the girl and get her married off in due course. At Tara's house in Pagotes, Dehuti lives more or less as a maidservant. After a few years, Dehuti runs away with Ramchand, one of Tara's servants, and gets married to him. Dehuti belongs to a Brahmin family, while Ramchand is a low-caste Hindu. Dehuti's action in eloping with Ramchand is regarded by Tara as disgraceful, and Tara vows never again to speak to Dehuti.

Ramchand's Loquacity and His Optimism

Years pass. One day Mr. Biswas happens to meet Ramchand by a sheer chance. Ramchand speaks to Mr. Biswas in a very familiar manner and takes him to his house to meet Dehuti. Ramchand is a very loquacious* person, and he gives to Mr. Biswas plenty of information about various persons, such as Mr. Biswas's two brothers (Pratap and Prasad), and Mr. Biswas's uncle Bhandat who had dismissed Mr. Biswas from the rum-shop. Ramchand also speaks about Ajodha and Tara, saying that Ajodha's finances are not as sound as they appear to be. At the same time Ramchand appears to be a very optimistic man. However, to Mr. Biswas it seems that marriage has not brought much happiness to Dehuti. She seems to be uneasy at having been caught unawares by her brother among her household possessions. She seems to disapprove of her husband's talking in praise of the hut in which they are living and of the kind of life which they are leading. Dehuti does not show much pleasure at having met Mr. Biswas, though they have met after a very long time. She is now the mother of a child whom she brings from an inner room in order that Mr. Biswas may see it. Dehuti looks careworn and sulky. She remains untouched by her husband's bubbling desire to please Mr. Biswas. Yet in her slow and reluctant manner she does what she can to make Mr. Biswas welcome. Dehuti had never been a pretty girl, but now she looks absolutely ugly. Her Chinese eyes appear to be sleepy; and her cheeks are red with pimples. Ramchand informs Mr. Biswas that he is going to make some improvements in his hut. He says that he is going to build an extra room and that, when it is completed, Mr. Biswas can come and stay there.

Ramchand's Job in a Lunatic Asylum

Several more years pass. When Mr. Biswas lies ill at Hanuman House after having suffered a nervous breakdown at Green Vale,

*Loquacious—talkative; garrulous.

Ramchand is one of those who come to inquire about his health. Ramchand, who had previously been working in a brewery producing rum, is now living and working in Port of Spain where he is employed as a warder in the Lunatic Asylum. On this occasion too Ramchand is as effusive in talking as he was previously. He tells Mr. Biswas that at the Lunatic Asylum they try to divert the minds of the inmates by playing to them gramophone records. He also speaks of the facilities and perquisites which he is enjoying as an employee of the Lunatic Asylum. He speaks of the canteen where the employees get everything much cheaper than people get outside. Ramchand then suggests that Mr. Biswas should not rot in the countryside but should go to Port of Spain and try his luck there. "Come up and spend some time with us. Dehuti is always talking about you," he says to Mr. Biswas. When Ramchand is leaving, he happens to meet Sushila to whom he says : "Everything all right, Maharajin ?" After he has gone, Sushila says that this fellow looks like a real *chamar*,* that is, a fellow belonging to the lowest caste. Chinta thereupon makes another adverse remark about Ramchand saying : "However much you wash a pig, you can't turn it into a cow."

Mr. Biswas's Visit to Dehuti and Ramchand in Port of Spain

When Mr. Biswas slips away one day from Hanuman House after his recovery from his mental illness, he does not know where to go. Suddenly it occurs to him that Ramchand had suggested that he should try his luck in Port of Spain. So Mr. Biswas gets into a bus bound for Port of Spain. Arriving there, Mr. Biswas makes his way to the address which Ramchand had given him. Ramchand and Dehuti receive him cordially. Dehuti is now the mother of two sons. Mr. Biswas finds that Dehuti's younger son is quite fond of reading, and so he congratulates Dehuti and Ramchand on having a son who is keenly interested in his studies. Ramchand and Dehuti are living in two rooms and Mr. Biswas now begins to live with them, sharing one of the two rooms with their children. The other tenants in this house are all Negroes. Ramchand gladly takes Mr. Biswas on a sight-seeing tour of the city. He takes Mr. Biswas to the Botanical Gardens, to the Government House, to the Chancellor Hill, and to the harbour. For Mr. Biswas this sight-seeing is a very romantic experience. Mr. Biswas had seen the sea before, but he had not known that Port of Spain was really a port at which ocean liners call from all parts of the world.

Ramchand's City Manners

Mr. Biswas feels quite amused by Ramchand's city manners. Ramchand's way of speaking is very hearty, and he always speaks in a loud voice. He speaks English most of the time, but with a rural Indian accent. At the end of a fortnight of Mr. Biswas's stay in this

**Chamar*—a Hindi word meaning an untouchable or a low-caste person,

house, Ramchand tells him not to worry about getting a job too soon. Ramchand advises Mr. Biswas to have lots of rest before he thinks of trying to get a job. Ramchand also makes a suggestion that, when Mr. Biswas decides to take up a job, he would be able to get one in the Lunatic Asylum where the employees enjoy many facilities. However, Mr. Biswas shows no interest in this suggestion.

Not Much of a Role in the Story : A Comic Portrayal

On the whole, the portrayal of Ramchand is comic like the portrayal of so many other characters in this novel. Dehuti, on the other hand, gives us an impression of being a very dull kind of woman. Ramchand and Dehuti do not have any important role in the story of the novel. They have been introduced just to fill the social picture which is one of the most prominent features of this novel. However, Ramchand does have a share in Mr. Biswas's decision to go to Port of Spain in order to start a new career there.

9. ALEC

Alec is a Christian boy studying at the same school to which Mr. Biswas is admitted with Tara's help. Mr. Biswas becomes very friendly with Alec and, though the two boys never visit each other's house, they are always together at school. Even when the teacher tries to separate them by flogging them both, they again come together. Alec generally comes to school dressed in colourful shirts. Actually these are not his own shirts. His brother's wife gives him her colourful bodices to wear. On one occasion Alec startles the whole school by peeing blue. It is subsequently discovered that he had swallowed some medicinal pills as a result of which his urine had turned blue. Mr. Biswas, following Alec's example, also buys the same pills and swallows them with the same results. In Alec's company Mr. Biswas smokes his first cigarettes and plays other pranks, typical of children of their ages. For some time after leaving school, Alec loses touch with Mr. Biswas but soon afterwards the two young men meet again. Alec has for some time worked as a motor-mechanic in a garage; but then he becomes a sign-painter. Under Alec's influence and with Alec's help, Mr. Biswas too now becomes a sign-painter and he continues with this occupation till the time of his marriage and for some time afterwards also. Alec figures in the novel only during the early stages of Mr. Biswas's career; and then he is dropped by the author.

10. GHANY

Ghany, who figures only in the beginning of the second chapter and is then dropped entirely, is a solicitor and a commissioner of oaths at Pagotes where Tara and Ajodha live and where Bipti and Mr. Biswas also begin living some time after the death of Mr. Biswas's father. It is to Ghany that Tara takes Bipti when Bipti wants a certificate of birth for Mr. Biswas at the time of his admission to the local school. Ghany is depicted by the author more or less as a comic figure. He addresses Tara as "Maharajin." He tells

Tara and Bipti that to get a birthday certificate on the basis of an affidavit is an expensive business. He then gets his fee of ten dollars from the two women and tells them that the certificate of birth would be ready at the end of the following week. Ghany makes most of his money from Hindus; but, being a Muslim, distrusts them. Ghany does not maintain a tidy office. Everything in his office is dusty.

11. LAL

Lal is the name of the teacher under whose charge Mr. Biswas is put when the boy is admitted to the local school at Pagotes. Lal was originally a low-caste Hindu but had subsequently been converted to Christianity. He is quite a strict kind of teacher who does not believe in sparing the rod and spoiling the child. In fact, he is always ready with the tamarind rod of which he is the proud possessor. And he does not hesitate to flog Alec or Mr. Biswas or any other boy at the slightest provocation. Lal too contributes his bit to the comedy in the novel.

12. PUNDIT JAIRAM

Pundit Jairam is the man at whose house Mr. Biswas begins to live under an arrangement made by Tara. Tara has decided that Mr. Biswas should grow up to be a pundit and that he should receive his training and instruction from Pundit Jairam. Pundit Jairam then begins to teach Mr. Biswas the elements of the work which a pundit has to do. Pundit Jairam's children have by this time all been married, and he is living alone with his wife who is over-worked by him. Jairam enjoys a lot of respect among Hindus for his knowledge, even though he holds radical views. He firmly believes in God, but he declares that it is not essential for a Hindu to believe in God. He also attacks the custom some families observe of putting up a flag after a religious ceremony. He does not eat meat, but he opposes vegetarianism on the ground that Lord Rama must have been a meat-eater because he used to go hunting in the forest not for sport but to obtain the flesh of animals to be eaten as food. Pundit Jairam begins to take Mr. Biswas with him on all his professional visits to various Hindu homes. Mr. Biswas thus becomes a kind of an assistant and an apprentice under Pundit Jairam. On one occasion Mr. Biswas stealthily eats two bananas from a bunch which had been given to Pundit Jairam as a gift. Pundit Jairam, resenting Mr. Biswas's action, forces the lad to eat all the bananas as a form of punishment. Mr. Biswas's stomach is upset as a consequence of this over-eating of bananas. In fact, he begins to suffer from a chronic indigestion, which remains with him all his life. Pundit Jairam dismisses Mr. Biswas from his house because of a serious misdemeanour committed by Mr. Biswas and, with this dismissal, Mr. Biswas's career as a pundit comes to an end.

13. MISIR

A Journalist with Progressive Views

Misir makes a brief appearance in the novel during the time when Mr. Biswas is living at Hanuman House and later when Mr. Biswas is living at Green Vale. Misir is a part-time journalist. He is the man who encourages Mr. Biswas to go and hear the lectures of the Arya Samaj missionary Pankaj Rai who is visiting Trinidad to try to convert the Sanatanist Indian Hindus living there to the Arya Samaj. Misir becomes an ardent admirer of Pankaj Rai whom he describes as a "purist" but who ultimately proves to be a corrupt fellow. Misir believes strongly in the ideas being propagated by Arya Samaj. By associating with Misir, Mr. Biswas too adopts the ideas preached by the Arya Samaj. Misir and Mr. Biswas agree that, if the Hindus cannot be converted to Arya Samaj through peaceful persuasion, they should be converted by the sword.

As a Writer of Short Stories

Misir is a married man having children. But he is not happy in his married life. His was an arranged marriage; and he is now opposed to such marriages. He describes an arranged marriage as a "cat-in-bag" affair. On one occasion when Mr. Biswas visits Misir's house he learns that Misir had packed his wife and children off to his mother-in-law. Mr. Biswas guesses the reason to be a quarrel between the husband and the wife or the wife's pregnancy. Misir says that, in the absence of his family, he has been "working like hell." He says that he has been writing short stories. Misir then acquaints Mr. Biswas with some of the stories which he has written. His first story is about a man who had been out of work for months and was starving. This man's five children were starving, and his wife was going to have another baby. It was December and the shops were full of food and toys. On Christmas Eve, the man got a job. Going home that evening, that man was knocked down and killed by a motor-car. Misir's second story was about a man who had been out of work for months and was starving. To maintain his large family the man began selling his possessions. Finally, this man had nothing left with him except a two-shilling lottery ticket. The man did not want to sell the ticket; but one of his children fell dangerously ill and needed medicine. The man sold that ticket for a shilling and bought medicine. The child died; and the lottery ticket, which the man had sold, won the first prize. Thus both the stories were tragic, and both dealt with the ironies of life. Mr. Biswas uses this visit to Misir for persuading the journalist to publish a news-item in the newspaper for which he is working. The news-item is that the Tulsi family has been rearing pigs. This news-item, when published, lowers the Tulsi family in the esteem of the Hindu community because the Hindus, especially the orthodox ones, are not expected to rear pigs. Actually, the news is false; but Mr. Biswas has got this false news published in the newspaper as an act

of revenge on the Tulsi family who has been responsible for Mr. Biswas's occupation having been specified in Savi's birth-certificate as that of a labourer, while Mr. Biswas was actually working as a shopkeeper and not as a labourer.

14. BHANDAT

His Unsavoury Reputation

Bhandat is Ajodha's brother, and it is he who runs Ajodha's rum-shop. It is to this rum-shop that Mr. Biswas is sent to work as an assistant to Bhandat, after Mr. Biswas has been dismissed by Pundit Jairam. Mr. Biswas finds that Bhandat is not enjoying a good reputation as the keeper of this rum-shop. There are some unpleasant rumours afloat about Bhandat. He is said to be a drunkard; he is said to be ill-treating his wife and beating her; and he is said to be keeping a mistress belonging to another community.

A Comic Portrayal

Bhandat has been described by the author as a small man, with a nose as sharp as his brother Ajodha's and a face equally thin. Bhandat's voice is a whine with a querulous edge. His face can never express benignity; it always looks harassed and irritable. He is going bald, and the curve of his forehead repeats the curve of his nose. Thus, the very manner in which Bhandat is described is amusing. The portrayal of this man is largely comic, as are so many other portrayals in this novel.

A Dishonest Man. His Ill-Treatment of His Wife

Bhandat regards Mr. Biswas as Tara's spy and therefore he distrusts Mr. Biswas who has been sent to the rum-shop by Tara and Ajodha to assist Bhandat and to learn the trade. Mr. Biswas soon discovers that Bhandat is a dishonest man who is cheating his customers as well as the owners of the shop, namely Tara and Ajodha. Bhandat gives to his customers less than the correct measure of the drinks which they order at the shop, and he pockets the extra money which he thus gets. Bhandat becomes hostile to Mr. Biswas even more when he finds that Mr. Biswas has seen through the tricks that he plays with his customers. Bhandat is at this time living with his family in two rooms in one of which Mr. Biswas sleeps with Bhandat's two sons Jagdat and Rabidat. Bhandat spends his week-ends away from the shop. He evidently goes to spend these week-ends with his mistress. His sons talk openly of his mistress, but they do not resent his keeping a mistress; in fact, they refer to his mistress with a feeling of pride. However, the sons do feel somewhat upset when Bhandat's quarrels with his wife become more frequent. In the course of these quarrels Bhandat shouts obscene words at his wife, while she keeps silent. Occasionally Bhandat throws things around in his rage.

His Accusation Against Mr. Biswas

One day Bhandat finds the money in his pocket to be short of one dollar. He thinks that Mr. Biswas has stolen a dollar from the cash in his trouser pocket. So he accuses Mr. Biswas of theft though Mr. Biswas protests that he did not even know that there was any money in Bhandat's pocket. Bhandat is not content with accusing Mr. Biswas of having stolen the money but he goes so far as to give a good beating to Mr. Biswas with his leather-belt and then driving him out of the shop saying : "Get out, you nasty tale-carrying lout. Get out from here at once before I peel the skin off your back." Bhandat's dismissal of Mr. Biswas marks the end of Mr. Biswas's apprenticeship as a shop-assistant. Subsequently Bhandat finds the missing dollar lying stuck to a corner of his pocket.

Living With His Chinese Mistress in a Slum of Port of Spain

After some time, Mrs. Bhandat dies in child-birth and Bhandat goes to Port of Spain to live with his mistress, leaving his two sons behind. Bhandat's sons are taken in by Tara and Ajodha, and the boys then grow up there in the household of their uncle and aunt. Years later when Mr. Biswas is working as an investigator into the cases of deserving destitutes, he receives a letter from Bhandat asking Mr. Biswas to see him. Mr. Biswas goes to meet his uncle, and finds him living in wretched circumstances in a slum area of Port of Spain. Bhandat is still living with his mistress who turns out to be a Chinese woman. Bhandat tells Mr. Biswas that he is trying to win a prize by writing the best slogan in praise of Lux Toilet Soap. The slogan that he has drafted is as follows : "I use Lux Toilet Soap because it is the soap used by lovely film stars." Bhandat then complains to Mr. Biswas that his sons are worthless because neither of them has ever come to see him. Mr. Biswas also finds that Bhandat is not very affectionate towards his mistress but is quite harsh towards her. At Bhandat's request, Mr. Biswas suggests some words which Bhandat can use in his slogan to be submitted to the makers of Lux Toilet Soap. These words are : "Antiseptic, fragrant, refreshing, and inexpensive." Bhandat also gives to Mr. Biswas an account of the life he has led after having left his sons. Bhandat speaks in complete sentences, thus giving to his talk a literary quality. His story is one of jobs acquired and lost, of great enterprises which had failed, of wonderful opportunities which he had not availed because of his own honesty or the dishonesty of his associates. Bhandat also wants Mr. Biswas to help him with a crossword puzzle to enable him to win a prize

15,16. JAGDAT AND RABIDAT

Their Loose Lives and Illegitimate Children

Jagdat and Rabidat are the two sons of Bhandat who is Ajodha's brother. Jagdat is Bhandat's elder son, while Rabidat is his

younger son. After Bhandat leaves Ajodha's rum-shop and goes away to Port of Spain in order to live with his mistress, the two sons of Bhandat are accommodated by Tara and Ajodha in their house, and they grow up there. Their mother had died some time before their father's departure for Port of Spain. While Mr. Biswas develops a love of reading, these two boys do not feel much interested in books. Instead of developing the reading habit as Ajodha would like them to do, they learn to smoke, and they specialize in telling stories relating to sex. At night the two brothers talk in whispers about their sexual fantasies. It is not that the two boys are illiterate; in fact, Rabidat often reads out the newspaper column "That Body of Yours" to his uncle just as Mr. Biswas used to do previously. But these boys are not really serious about any vocation in life. In course of time these two nephews of Ajodha begin to lead loose lives. As far as Tara and Ajodha are concerned, Jagdat and Rabidat are bachelors; but it is generally known that both men are living with their mistresses and have even begotten several illegitimate children. Rabidat often becomes insolent to Ajodha while Ajodha often ridicules Rabidat. Ajodha ridicules Rabidat for having a fat paunch, while in actual fact he is proud of Rabidat's body which is very strong and muscular. Ajodha is attached to both his nephews because he thinks them to be indispensable to him from the business point of view, while the two nephews, with large unacknowledged families, with no money of their own, and with no status apart from their relationship with Ajodha, know fully well that they depend upon Ajodha's generosity. "Rabidat, of the beautiful body, seemed to have his prognathous* mouth perpetually set for a snarl. Jagdat's giggles turn in a moment to screams and tears."

Jagdat's Criticism of Ajodha

Whenever Mr. Biswas sees Jagdat, he has a feeling that Jagdat has just come from a funeral. This is so because Jagdat always wears black clothes, black socks, black shoes, and so on. Jagdat's eyes are as small as Rabidat's, but livelier; his face is squarer: he laughs more often, showing his rabbit-like teeth. Jagdat harbours a sort of grudge against Ajodha despite Ajodha's generosity towards both the boys. In his private talk with Mr. Biswas, Jagdat refers to Ajodha as "that son of a bitch" and complains that Ajodha is doing nothing to help Bhandat. Jagdat says that Ajodha is always ready to suggest Vitamin A and Vitamin B to everybody but that, when any real help is needed from him, he would not do anything at all. Jagdat on one occasion relates an anecdote about Ajodha having given a cup of tea to his gardener and having then deducted six cents from the gardener's wages.

*Prognathous—with projecting jaws.

Jagdat's Exploitation of Ajodha

Jagdat is adopted by Ajodha as his heir. Evidently, Ajodha does not know that Jagdat secretly hates him. Jagdat not only hates Ajodha but is always exploiting him. For instance, Jagdat is giving to a liquor-dealer free petrol from Ajodha's petrol pumps, while the liquor-dealer gives free liquor to Jagdat and also allows Jagdat the use of his drawing-room on Sunday mornings for purposes of drinking. It is in this drawing-room that Jagdat often entertains Mr. Biswas with whisky. Jagdat is critical not only of his uncle Ajodha but also of his father Bhandat who is living with his mistress. Jagdat commits many other indiscretions also, without letting Ajodha know anything about them. When Mr. Biswas goes to meet Ajodha and Tara in his new car, Jagdat expresses a desire to drive this car, but Mr. Biswas does not let him drive the car because he fears that Jagdat by his reckless driving might do some damage to the vehicle. Jagdat thereupon feels very annoyed with Mr. Biswas and makes all kinds of unfriendly remarks.

Comic Portrayals

The portrayals of Bhandat and his two sons are all comic. The two boys have taken after their father in so far as they too are keeping mistresses. The father had at least got married and begotten two legitimate children, while the two sons who are themselves legitimate do not marry at all but keep mistresses and have begotten a horde of illegitimate children.

17. MR. MACLEAN

Several Economies Suggested By Mr. Maclean

Mr. Maclean is a Negro carpenter-cum-blacksmith-cum-painter-cum-builder. He is the man engaged by Mr. Biswas to build the house which Mr. Biswas had decided to build for himself and his family at Green Vale. When Hari has performed the necessary ceremony to make the announcement of the construction of the house, Mr. Maclean asks Mr. Biswas to provide something to "wet" the job. What Mr. Maclean means is that Mr. Biswas should give him and his assistant (another Negro) some liquor to drink; and Mr. Biswas has to comply. Mr. Maclean and his assistant then start working in a very cheerful mood. Mr. Biswas had decided to build a regular house with genuine materials, not a ramshackle lodge. However, he cannot raise the necessary amount of money for the genuine materials. Mr. Maclean, who has known such situations before, suggests various ways of economizing the expenditure. He suggests that they should use cedar planks instead of pitch-pine for the floor. Then he suggests that, instead of using genuine rafters, they should obtain only tree-branches which, after the necessary trimming, would serve the same purpose as genuine rafters. To

economize the expenditure further, Mr. Maclean dispenses with the services of his assistant (Edgar) and begins to work alone. At Mr. Maclean's suggestion pitch is used instead of mastic cement. In spite of these economies, the construction work has to be suspended because Mr. Biswas has run short of money.

Only One Room Completed By Mr. Maclean

One day Mr. Maclean comes again. He tells Mr. Biswas that somebody has offered to sell some timber at a bargain price. Mr. Maclean says that the timber would be enough for the walls of one of the two rooms. The timber is then purchased. It is cedar. The back bed-room is walled with this timber. But already cracks have appeared in the floor-boards, and asphalt has begun to slip out of the roof. Mr. Biswas, knowing well that inferior materials had been used, has to accept the inevitable. After this, the construction of the house is not resumed; and the house remains incomplete. Mr. Biswas then moves from the barracks into the one completed bed-room of the house which he can claim to be his own even though it has remained incomplete and is not likely to prove a durable structure. In the event, after Mr. Biswas has been removed to Hanuman House to be treated for his ailment, Mr. Biswas's house is burned down by the labourers at Green Vale.

18, 19. MOTI AND MUNGROO

Moti, a Lawyer's Tout

Moti is a lawyer's tout who approaches Mr. Biswas when Mr. Biswas is running a food-shop at the village of The Chase. Mr. Biswas has been having some trouble with his customers who, after having bought their needs of life from his shop on credit, have not been paying their bills. Moti is the man who induces Mr. Biswas to engage the lawyer Seebaran in order to serve a legal notice on some of his customers for the recovery of the money which they owe to him. Mr. Biswas falls into the trap. He pays to Moti the lawyer's fee. A legal notice is accordingly served on Mungroo, one of the defaulting customers. But the consequences of this action taken by Mr. Biswas at the instigation of Moti are disastrous for Mr. Biswas.

Mungroo, a Village Bully

Mungroo is a resident of the village of The Chase, and the leader of the village stick-fighters. As a stick-man, Mungroo is a champion. It was he who organized the young men of the village into a fighting squad, ready to defend the honour of the village on the days of the Christian Carnival and the Muslim festivals. By profession Mungroo is a road-mender. Actually he does no work at all. He has made it clear to the people that, because he is a defender of the honour of the village, the village people owe him a living. Mr. Biswas has been an admirer of Mungroo because of the latter's

social spirit, and he has therefore never refused credit to Mungroo. However, a time comes when Mr. Biswas can no longer give any credit to Mungroo. In fact, Mr. Biswas serves a legal notice on Mungroo for the recovery of the amount which Mungroo already owes to him. In retaliation Mungroo engages another lawyer by the name of Mahmoud who serves a notice on Mr. Biswas, charging him with having defamed his client by having accused him of non-payment of bills. The ultimate result of this dispute is that Mr. Biswas has to pay a heavy amount of money to Mungroo as compensation. Thus the village bully gets the better of the village shop-keeper who had simply tried to recover the money to which he was entitled.

20. SHEKHAR

Shekhar and His Brother Owad, Privileged Persons in the Family

Shekhar is the elder son of Mrs. Tulsi. He is introduced to us when he is attending the Roman Catholic College in Port of Spain and comes home every week-end. His younger brother Owad is at this time being coached to enter the college. At Hanuman House the two brothers are kept separate from the noisy group of the other inmates. They study in the drawing-room and sleep in a separate bed-room. The two brothers often perform the *puja* in the prayer-room. Though they are still very young, they are admitted into the councils of their mother Mrs. Tulsi and their uncle Seth; and the views of the two brothers are quoted with respect by their sisters and brothers-in-law. The best of the food in the house is always set aside for them, and they are given special brain-feeding meals, of fish in particular. When the two brothers appear among their sisters and brothers-in-law they always look grave, and sometimes stern. Occasionally, they serve in the Tulsi Store, sitting near the cash-box, with their text-books open before them. Since the two brothers receive preferential treatment in the house as compared to all the other inmates, Mr. Biswas mockingly refers to them as the "two gods". Mr. Biswas also describes them as barbers and as monkeys to show his contempt for them. However, in later years, Mr. Biswas's relations with the two brothers improves considerably, though towards the end he has a serious quarrel with Owad.

Ridiculed By Mr. Biswas For Wearing a Crucifix

Both the brothers react strongly to Mr. Biswas's sarcastic comments upon their mother and upon themselves. On one occasion, for instance, Shekhar tearfully says that he is not going to remain sitting in his hammock* while anybody in this house insults him or his mother. He says that the fact that Mr. Biswas takes liberties with all of them is due to his mother's own weakness. He tells his mother

* *Hammock*—a rocky ng-bed.

that she has brought Mr. Biswas into this house to eat all the food which can be bought with her late husband's money and then to insult her sons. Both Mrs. Tulsi and Seth then try to appease Shekhar by assuring him that they would suitably deal with Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas mocks at Shekhar for wearing a crucifix. According to Mr. Biswas, a crucifix, being a Christian symbol, should not be worn by an orthodox Hindu. Actually, Shekhar wears the crucifix as an exotic charm against evil. Shekhar wears many other charms as well. On the Sunday before the examination week, he is bathed by Mrs. Tulsi in water made holy by Hari through sacred *mantras*; the soles of Shekhar's feet are soaked in lavender water; he is made to drink a glass of Guinness stout; and he leaves Hanuman House, wearing not only a crucifix, but also a sacred thread and beads, and a number of curious armlets. He also carries a lime in each trouser pocket as part of his equipment to guarantee his success in the examination.

Married to a Presbyterian Wife

When Shekhar is still studying at the Roman Catholic College in Port of Spain, his mother starts looking for a suitable wife for him from amongst the handful of well-to-do Hindu families. He expresses his disapproval of all those families by his angry outbursts of tears and even by threats of suicide. But this behaviour on his part is regarded by his sisters and brothers-in-law as a form of conventional shyness. Eventually, Shekhar does get married, but not to a Hindu girl. The search for a girl among the Hindu families having failed to provide someone beautiful and educated and rich enough to satisfy Mrs. Tulsi or her daughters, a bride for Shekhar is found in a Presbyterian family which is quite rich and which owns one petrol-pump, two lorries, a cinema, and some land. The marriage takes place in the office of the registrar and, after the marriage, Shekhar, instead of bringing his bride home to Hanuman House, goes to live with his bride's family in order to be able to look after the business interests of that family.

His Regular Visits to His Mother and Sisters

Years later, when Mrs. Tulsi is living in Port of Spain, Shekhar often comes to see her with his wife whose name is Dorothy. He and Dorothy also come to see off Owad when he is leaving for England; and they come also to receive Owad when Owad returns from England after an eight-year stay there. Shekhar is always received affectionately by his sisters and his mother, but Dorothy is not liked by anyone in the family because she belongs to a different religion and even more so because she is a proud woman. On one occasion, when some of the widowed sisters of Shekhar approach him for a loan to start a mobile restaurant he offers them jobs in his cinemas. The widows regard this offer as an insult and see in it the hand of Shekhar's wife, Dorothy. So they refuse the offer saying that they do not want to get employed in a cinema belonging to Dorothy's

family and that they would never like to work in a place of public entertainment. By now Shekhar has become the father of as many as five daughters who all have an elegant appearance. Whenever he comes to see his mother and sisters, he comes in his car and brings his family with him. Although his sisters are indifferent to Dorothy, and even severely critical of her, Shekhar never treats them unkindly.

The Influence of the Alien Western Culture

Shekhar's marriage to a Presbyterian wife shows the influence of the alien western culture upon the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi family. In the beginning Shekhar only wears a crucifix; but later he marries a Christian girl. His deviation from orthodoxy is thus very great, but it is a deviation which is fully approved by his mother, though not by his sisters. Thus we find that the Tulsi family, which seems to symbolize orthodoxy and conservatism, cannot resist the influence of modernity. Several years later Owad too becomes completely westernized.

21. DOROTHY

A Modern, Christian Girl

Dorothy is the Christian girl to whom Shekhar gets married. She belongs to the Presbyterian sect of Christianity, and she comes of a rich, propertied family. After getting married to her, Shekhar leaves his mother's house and settles down with his wife's family, becoming a kind of manager to look after her family's property. In Dorothy, the proud sisters of Shekhar meet more than their match. Dorothy meets the Tulsi pride and patronage with her arrogant Presbyterian modernity. She makes a display of her being well educated; she feels proud of calling herself Dorothy; she wears short frocks and does not care if others think her lewd or indecent.

Not Liked By Shekhar's Sisters

Dorothy is described by the author as a big woman who grows fat after the birth of her first child. She has a deep voice and a hearty manner. Once, when she has hurt her ankle, she uses a stick to support herself while walking, and Chinta then remarks that the stick suits her well, implying that it would not matter if Dorothy becomes lame. (Of course, her remark is intended as an insult to Dorothy). Dorothy sometimes sells the tickets at her cinema, and this is regarded by Shekhar's sisters as something not only disgraceful but immoral. But Dorothy never bothers about what Shekhar's sisters say about her. In fact, she is always able to defeat Shekhar's sisters. For instance, the sisters had said that Dorothy would not be able to keep a house, while Dorothy proves to be an excellent housewife; they had said that Dorothy would prove to be a barren woman, but actually Dorothy gives birth to a child every two years. No doubt, her children are all girls, but even this is no triumph for

the sisters because Dorothy's daughters are all of exceptional beauty. Dorothy surprises and disappoints the sisters even by choosing Hindi names for her daughters—Mira, Leela, Lena, etc.

Her Triumph Over Shekhar's Sisters

Shekhar's sister criticize Dorothy in other ways too. For instance, they say that Dorothy, like all Christians, uses her right hand for unclean purposes, that her sexual appetite is tremendous, that her daughters already have the eyes of whores. Over and above that, the sisters declare that Shekhar is to be pitied because he had not gone to Cambridge and had instead been married against his will to a wife who is shameless. Dorothy causes further annoyance to Shekhar's sisters when she speaks to her daughters in Spanish in the presence of the sisters, because the sisters do not understand Spanish. However, Mr. Biswas always gets on well with Dorothy. He is attracted by her gaiety; and, besides, he regards her as an ally against the sisters. Dorothy wins her final triumph over the sisters when she brings a cousin of hers along with her on a visit to Mrs. Tulsi's house, and when in course of time Owad gets married to this cousin of Dorothy's

22. OWAD

A Comic Portrayal to a Large Extent

Owad is Mrs. Tulsi's younger son. Both brothers are pampered by their mother and their sisters, and this is the reason why Mr. Biswas refers to them sarcastically as the gods or as the little gods. In the beginning Mr. Biswas is highly critical of both the brothers, not only referring to them ironically as the gods but also describing them insultingly as "monkeys" and "barbers." Thus at the outset both the brothers are portrayed in a comic light; but as they grow in years, they shed their absurdities, and the portrayal then becomes serious, though Owad still amuses us greatly when he returns from England as a completely westernized man speaking of his many triumphs and achievements in that country.

Insulted By Mr. Biswas

Like Shekhar, Owad reacts angrily against Mr. Biswas's contemptuous attitude towards the entire Tulsi family. Owad feels greatly upset when Mr. Biswas goes out of his way to insult him by gargling out the water upon Owad's head, and then a little later throwing a plateful of food from the window upon Owad's head. Govind, taking Owad's side, pounces upon Mr. Biswas and begins to shower blows upon him, whereupon Owad feels jubilant and shouts to Govind to go on with the beating and to kill Mr. Biswas: "Kill him! Kill him, Uncle Govind!" Addressing Mr. Biswas Owad ironically says: "Go ahead. Why you don't spit now?"

Owad's Account of His Experiences in England

Years later, Owad goes to England for his medical studies. He stays in England for eight years and, when he returns to Trinidad, he gets a rousing reception from his mother, his sisters, his brothers-in-law, and many other relatives as well. Mr. Biswas too goes to the wharf to receive him, though he does not show much enthusiasm on the occasion. Owad returns to Trinidad a completely westernized man, and he talks at great length about his experiences in England. All the inmates of Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain crowd around him every time he begins to talk about his experiences. He tells them that he had done a lot of service to the people in England during the war by taking part in fire-fighting and in rescuing those in distress or in danger. He speaks of the surgical operations he had performed on famous Englishmen and the jobs which had been offered to him as a consequence. He tells them that he had even been offered a seat in Parliament. He says that he had met such distinguished men as Russell, Joad, Radhakrishnan, Laski, and Krishna Menon. All the listeners fall under Owad's spell when he talks. As Owad has expressed his opposition to the ideas of Krishna Menon, his sister Chinta too begins to feel antagonistic towards that Indian statesman. Owad also speaks in highly unfavourable terms about the new Indians coming from India to Trinidad or going to England. These new Indians, he says, are lecherous and in England they make it a point to go around with nurses and other women of the lower classes. These Indians start eating meat and drinking liquor to prove their modernity as soon as they arrive in England, says Owad.

Owad's Communist Ideas

Owad has come back to Trinidad not only as a fully modernized man but also as a Communist. He expresses his ardent admiration for the Russian system of government and he pays a tribute to the achievements of the Red Army during World War II. He speaks familiarly of Russian generals and their battles, and he pronounces Russian names in an impressive manner. He says that he had canvassed for the English Labour Party in the 1945 elections and that he was regarded as one of the architects of the Labour victory. He had earned the bitter hatred of the Conservative Party by his denunciation of Winston Churchill's Fulton speech. Speaking of Russia, he says that there is work for everybody in that country and that everybody must work. He who does not work is not fed in Russia. Besides, people have the freedom to choose their own occupations. If a woman like Sushila wants to become a doctor in that country, she can study for a medical career free of charge. There is no discrimination in that country between the sexes.

His Varied Interests and His Efficiency as a Doctor

Owad gets a job as a doctor at the Colonial Hospital in Trinidad. He has come back to Trinidad with the latest knowledge

about treatment of diseases. He takes a good deal of interest in his patients. His relations now come to him for treatment, and he attends to them without charging them any fees. He gives injections with new miracle drug which, he says, have so far been unknown in this colony. But he does not pay all his attention to his work as a doctor. His interests are many and varied. He organizes swimming parties, boating expeditions, and pingpong tournaments. And such is the admiration and respect felt for him that even enemies come together on the playground. Owad's appetite for talk is insatiable; his dramatic gifts never fail; and the comments he makes on the people he had met are always of a scathing kind. His sisters show a great interest in him. They meet him singly and also in small groups. Each of the sisters tells him all her troubles and difficulties. They convey to him every scandal, every petty dispute, every little resentment. And Owad listens to each of them patiently.

His Marriage to Dorothy's Cousin

One day Mr. Biswas quarrels with Owad. Mrs. Tulsi naturally sides with Owad and becomes furious with Mr. Biswas. This quarrel ultimately leads to Mr. Biswas's quitting Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain and shifting to a house which he buys in Sikkim Street. In course of time Owad takes less and less interest in the family, and begins to spend more time away from home. He begins to mix more with his medical colleagues, and he begins to pay regular visits to his brother Shekhar and his family. He begins to play tennis at the India Club. In the Epilogue we are informed that Owad subsequently gets married to Dorothy's cousin at whom he had originally scoffed. This marriage marks yet another stage in Naipaul's account of the effect of the alien western culture on the Tulsi family which has begun to disintegrate or has already disintegrated by the time we reach the end of the story.

23. PADMA

Her Peace-making Role in the House

Padma is the wife of Seth who is one of the two rulers of Hanuman House. She is a woman with a mild and gentle nature. She does not want any unpleasantness among the inmates of Hanuman House, and she is always trying to maintain good relations with everybody. When, on one occasion, Mr. Biswas, having quarrelled with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad, gets ready to quit Hanuman House, Padma tries to pacify him. In her effort to pacify Mr. Biswas she is assisted by Govind's wife Chinta. Thus Padma's role in the house is that of a peace-maker. She is much respected by all members of the family because of this peace-making role. There is hardly anyone in the house with whom her husband Seth has not quarrelled at some time or other. On such occasions Padma never expresses either approval or disapproval of her husband's actions or

of the actions of those with whom her husband has quarrelled. There is something perennially wrong with Padma's health. She has a pale skin which always looks oily; and she continually fans herself, as if troubled by some inner bodily heat. Padma resembles Mrs. Tulsi in looks and general appearance but is fatter and looks older than the latter. Padma's authority in the house is next only to that of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. She is very keen to maintain family unity and to uphold the family name. She is a completely inoffensive person, without the least touch of aggressiveness or bellicosity in her nature.

The Report of Her Death

Years later, when the Tulsi family is living at Shorthills, while Seth and Padma had stayed on at Arwacas on account of the rift that had taken place between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, news comes from Arwacas that Padma has died. After this news has been received by the Tulsi family, the women-folk at Shorthills start saying that Padma has appeared to them in their dreams. Their view is that Padma's spirit has come to the Tulsi home at Shorthills, though Padma had never visited this place during her life-time. One of the women says that she has heard Padma's footsteps on the road during the night. The women-folk then say, on the basis of the dreams which they have seen, that Padma had not died a natural death but had been killed by Seth. According to them, Seth had poisoned her to death or had beaten her to death and then bribed the doctor in order not to have the post-mortem examination.

24. GOVIND

A Servile Son-in-law in the Beginning

Govind is one of the sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi. He is the husband of Chinta who is generally known as C. Before his marriage, Govind used to be a coconut-seller. He is a tall, well-built and handsome man, though in an unremarkable way. Govind's duties now are to work in the fields belonging to Mrs. Tulsi which are looked after by Seth. In the presence of Seth, Govind feels very small. In Seth's presence, Govind stammers and laughs in a nervous manner. Mr. Biswas, misjudging Govind's character, speaks to Govind against the Tulsi family whom he describes as "blood-suckers." Govind conveys all that Mr. Biswas has said to Seth and Mrs. Tulsi; and the result is that Seth and Mrs. Tulsi become hostile to Mr. Biswas. When one day Mr. Biswas has insulted Owad by throwing a plateful of food over Owad's head, Govind takes Owad's side and begins to give a beating to Mr. Biswas to punish him. It is with great difficulty that Chinta stops her husband from continuing the blows and causing a serious injury to Mr. Biswas.

This incident takes place early in the novel when Govind is completely subservient to the Tulsi family and works like a slave in their service.

A Comic Figure. The Development in His Character

The portrayal of Govind, as that of most of the other characters, is comic. For instance, we feel greatly amused by the manner in which he is described while taking his meals. When he begins eating, the author says that Govind had a way of assaulting his food as if anxious to prove that his appetite had been whetted by the hard work that he had done in the fields. He eats in a savage, noisy way, with rice and curry spilled all over his hairy hand and trickling down to his wrist. Later in the novel we are told that Govind, who used to be so loyal to the Tulsi family and so eager to serve Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, has begun to feel discontented and to indulge in seditious talk about his bosses. Later still, when the Tulsi family has shifted to Shorthills, Govind still does the same menial kind of work. His chief duty now is to look after the cows. But soon he shows signs of liberating himself from the influence of Mrs. Tulsi and attending more to his personal interests. As a rift has taken place between Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, there is now no reason for anyone to feel afraid of Mrs. Tulsi who has lost the support of Seth. Govind now begins to cut down some of the trees on the Tulsi estate in order to sell them for personal profit. Subsequently Govind stops doing any work for Mrs. Tulsi. He now buys a motor-car and operates it as a taxi in Port of Spain while still living at Shorthills. Later, when Mr. Biswas moves from Shorthills to Port of Spain, certain other members of the family also move to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain, and Govind is one of them. Govind now begins to make a lot of money from his taxi-driving for the Americans; and his prosperity is seen in the suits which he wears. He is no longer a rustic, but becomes a part of the urban population of Port of Spain. He is also now planning to buy a house of his own.

A Terror to Everybody

Govind who had at one time been servile to the Tulsi family and extremely considerate to his wife Chinta, now becomes so independent that he begins to beat his wife. The beatings become quite frequent with the passing of time. In fact, Govind now becomes a terror to all the inmates of Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. It seems as if his taxi-driving has turned him into a complete cynic. His behaviour now becomes odd and unpredictable. He now does not hesitate to offend others. He often insults Shama and her children. He assaults Basdai's readers, learners, and terrorizes them. Chinta does not come to the rescue of anybody. In fact, she feels proud of the fact that others are afraid of Govind. Govind often quarrels with Mr. Biswas also.

25. CHINTA

A Peace-Maker

Chinta, briefly referred to as C, is one of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi and the wife of Govind. She resembles Shama, but is shorter and sturdier, and her features are less fine. Chinta is an affectionate kind of woman. When Mr. Biswas, after a quarrel with Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, begins to pack up in order to leave Hanuman House, Chinta feels very perturbed. She begins to sob, and she appeals to Mr. Biswas not to leave. In a way she feels responsible for the quarrel that has taken place because the quarrel was the result of her husband Govind's conveying to Seth and Mrs. Tulsi what Mr. Biswas had privately said about them. Again, it is Chinta who intervenes and stops Govind from continuing to give blows to Mr. Biswas when Mr. Biswas has insulted Owad and Govind has taken Owad's side.

Fond of Reading the "Ramayana"

Chinta is a mild woman by comparison with Shama. Though she does have an occasional exchange of sarcastic remarks with Mr. Biswas, she does not become very offensive in her remarks. Occasionally, she does become pungent in her remarks as, for instance, when she tells Anand that his father Mr. Biswas should be able to guide him in his studies because, after all, his father is not an absolutely illiterate man. Chinta is very fond of reading the *Ramayana*. She continually sets herself new ambitions; and at one time her ambition is to become the first woman in the family to read the *Ramayana* from beginning to end. In the course of her reading through this epic, she also takes a hand at playing cards with her sisters and then returning to the *Ramayana*.

Her Loss of Some Money

On one occasion when Chinta has lost some money, she says that she would search everybody's room. She actually carries out her threat. In order to recover her money she follows the accepted methods such as searching with a candle in one hand and a crucifix in the other, and holding a trial by Bible-and-key. The Bible-and-key trial takes one whole afternoon. Chinta invokes the names of Saints Peter and Paul, and makes accusations against the thief who had stolen her money.

Proud of the Beatings Given to Her By Govind

Later in the novel, we learn that Govind has started beating her. However, she accepts the beatings without protest. In fact, she even feels proud of the fact that her husband beats her. These beatings make her feel more dignified; she thinks that the beatings given to her by her husband show that she occupies the high status

of a matriarch in the family. She cooperates fully with her husband in chanting holy songs in a loud voice so as to drown the noise being made by W.C. Tuttle's gramophone. The portrayal of Chinta is, on the whole, a comic one.

26. HARI

A Comic Figure in the Novel. The Constipated Holy Man

Hari is one of the sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi. He is described as a tall, pale, quiet man who spends much time at the long table in Hanuman House, working through heaps of rice in a slow, unenthusiastic but efficient way. Hari spends even more time in the latrine, and this fact makes him feared by the other inmates of Hanuman House. Making a sarcastic reference to Hari's lingering in the toilet, Mr. Biswas says: "They should ring a bell when Hari decides to go to the latrine just as they ring a bell to tell people that they are cutting off the water." It is generally accepted at Hanuman House that Hari is a sick man. His wife has told the others with sorrow and pride of the terrifying diagnoses of various doctors. Hari is not really suited for work on the Tulsi estate. Having a thin, gentle voice, he is in no position to give orders to the labourers and to rebuke the shirkers among them or to shout down the quarrelsome ones. Hari is in fact a pundit, by training and by inclination; and he never looks so happy as when he changes from estate clothes into a *dhoti* and sits in the verandah upstairs reading from some huge Hindi book. He performs the *puja* when the Tulsi sons are away, and he conducts occasional ceremonies for close friends. He offends no one and amuses no one. He is obsessed with his illnesses, with his food, and with his religious books. Between his estate duties, his reading in the verandah, and his visits to the latrine, Hari has little free time and it is difficult therefore to engage him in conversation. Hari believes in chewing every mouthful forty times, and he is a noisy and a big eater. Mr. Biswas makes it a habit to refer to Hari as "the constipated holy man." It is evident from all this that Naipaul's portrayal of Hari is a comic one, like several other portrayals in the novel.

The Respect Shown to Him On Particular Occasions

When Shama has decided to hold a house-blessing ceremony at The Chase, Hari is summoned to perform this sacred ceremony. Hari is as soft-spoken and gentle on this occasion as he has always been before. When he comes, he greets Mr. Biswas without any ill-will, but also without any pleasure and without any interest. Then he goes into the bed-room which has been reserved for him and he changes into the garb of a pundit, having brought this apparel in a small cardboard suitcase. When he comes out of the bed-room in that holy garb, everyone begins to treat him with a new respect. This respect lasts just as long as the ceremony which Hari performs.

“Constipatedly Apathetic”

When Mr. Biswas begins the construction of his own house at Green Vale, Shama again compels him to hold a religious ceremony. On this occasion too it is Hari who is invited to come and perform the ceremony. He comes, neither interested nor antagonistic, but just “constipatedly apathetic”. He comes, as he had come on the previous occasion, in his normal everyday clothes, but he brings with him his pundit’s garb packed in the same small cardboard suitcase. He takes a bath, changes into a *dhoti*, and goes to the site of the house to be built, carrying a brass jar, some mango leaves, and other equipment. He recites the prescribed holy verses, sprinkles water into a hole with a mango leaf, and drops a penny and certain other things wrapped in another mango leaf. Having gone through the whole ritual, Hari goes back to the barracks, changes into his trousers and shirt, and returns to Hanuman House.

Hari’s Position in the Tulsi Family

In one of his moods of depression, Mr. Biswas meditates upon Hari’s position in the Tulsi family, comparing himself to Hari. Hari spends all his free time in reading, though Hari makes no use of this reading. Hari dislikes disputation of any kind. Nobody is in a position to verify if Hari’s knowledge of Sanskrit is sound. Hari’s Vedic learning has to be taken on trust. Hari is respected inside the family and outside it. By comparison with him, Mr. Biswas himself is an insignificant man of whom nobody takes any notice.

His Premature Death

Hari dies at Hanuman House when most of the other members of the Tulsi family have shifted to Mrs. Tulsi’s house at Shorthills. He dies a premature death because he was never in good health. His death is sincerely mourned by the family at Shorthills. It is recalled that Hari had been one of those men of whom everybody had thought kindly. Hari had taken part in no disputes. His goodness, like his learning, was a family tradition. Everyone had been used to seeing Hari as the officiating pundit at religious ceremonies; and everyone had been accustomed to receiving morsels of sacred food from him every morning. Hari, in *dhoti*, his forehead marked with sandalwood paste; Hari doing morning and evening *pūja*; Hari with his religious books lying on a carved book-rest—these had been fixed sights in the Tulsi House. And now there was no one to take Hari’s place.

27. W.C. TUTTLE

A Tulsi Son-in-Law, Fond of W.C. Tuttle’s Books

W.C. Tuttle is one of Mrs. Tulsi’s sons-in-law. Actually his name is not W.C. Tuttle. W.C. Tuttle is the name of an author of

whose books this son-in-law of the Tulsis had become very fond and the reading of whose books had become a habit with him. It was because of this son-in-law's love of W.C. Tuttle's books that he too gets the name of W.C. Tuttle. This man enters the story at a very late stage. It is when the Tulsi family have moved to Shorthills that we meet this man. W.C. Tuttle is the father of several children, one of them being Prakash who claims that his father has got more books than Anand's father. At Mr. Biswas's suggestion, Anand then tells Prakash that all the books which Prakash's father has got are trash.

Several Initiatives By Him for His Own Benefit

W.C. Tuttle takes several initiatives at Shorthills. However, all these initiatives are meant to serve his own personal interests. For instance, it is he who dismantles the electricity plant, which was no longer in use, and melts down the lead to make dumb-bells for himself. Thereafter he takes daily exercise with these dumb-bells. Then, it is W.C. Tuttle who makes an announcement that a furniture factory would be started on the Tulsi estate. Under his orders scores of cedar trees are cut down and sawn. He then engages a Negro carpenter by the name of Theophile and gets a number of benches and ward-robres made by him. He also then gets a bookcase made from the planks of cedar wood. Subsequently, W.C. Tuttle sells the remaining planks of wood for his personal profit. Shortly afterwards he buys a lorry, and hires it out to the Americans who have come to Trinidad in large numbers. When the children living at Shorthills find it difficult to reach Port of Spain in time to attend their classes at school, W.C. Tuttle takes over the job of driving the children to the city. Previously this job was being done by another Tulsi son-in-law by the name of Sharma.

A Mixture of Orthodoxy and Modernity

W.C. Tuttle is a strict Hindu holding orthodox views. When some of the children from the Tulsi household kill a sheep and eat its roasted meat, W.C. Tuttle expresses his indignation at this un-Hindu act. He then refuses to eat any more from the common Tulsi kitchen, and makes his wife cook separately. One of W.C. Tuttle's sons afterwards reports that W.C. Tuttle's Brahmin mouth had burst into sores the day the sheep had been eaten. When Mr. Biswas shifts from Shorthills to Port of Spain, W.C. Tuttle follows suit. W.C. Tuttle and his family occupy most of the accommodation in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. They occupy the drawing-room, the dining-room, a bed-room, the kitchen, and the bath-room; while Govind and Chinta, who also shift to the city, get only one room, though Mr Biswas gets two rooms. In Port of Spain a dispute arises between W.C. Tuttle and Govind, because they both park their vehicles in the garage attached to the house and because in the morning they are in each other's way. The two men carry on this

quarrel without ever speaking to one another. W.C. Tuttle creates trouble for the other inmates of the house by buying a gramophone and playing one particular record on it again and again. Despite his strict Brahminical views, W.C. Tuttle is all in favour of modernity. In addition to the gramophone, he now possesses a radio-set, a number of dainty tables, and some other furniture. He creates a sensation when he buys a four-foot high statue of a naked woman holding a torch. One day Mr. Biswas's daughter Myna, wandering about the Tuttles' establishment, breaks the torch-bearing arm of this statue whereupon the Tuttles ban Myna's entry into their portion of the house. To counter the noise made by W.C. Tuttle's gramophone, Govind and Chinta begin to sing songs from the *Ramayana* in loud voices. The noise of the singing of Govind and Chinta, added to the noise of W.C. Tuttle's gramophone, makes life miserable for Mr. Biswas who wants peace and quiet in the house. But Mr. Biswas feels utterly helpless. However, on account of Govind's aggressive attitude towards Mr. Biswas's family, Mr. Biswas begins to look upon W.C. Tuttle as a possible ally against Govind. W.C. Tuttle is physically as strong as Govind. Besides, the quarrel between W.C. Tuttle and Govind about the parking of their vehicles is still continuing. Furthermore, there is something in common between W.C. Tuttle and Mr. Biswas: they both feel that by marrying into the Tulsi family they have fallen among barbarians.

The Influence of Western Civilization on Him

As already indicated, W.C. Tuttle is a blending of orthodox Brahminical views and modern western ideas. Although he calls himself one of the last defenders of Brahmin culture in Trinidad, yet he has yielded to the finer products of western civilization such as its literature, its music, and its art. Furthermore, W.C. Tuttle behaves at all times with a suitable dignity. He exchanges angry words with no one. If he hates anybody, he feels satisfied by showing his contempt for that person silently and with a quivering of his long-haired nostrils.

A Rivalry Between Him and Mr. Biswas

In spite of Mr. Biswas's effort to remain friends with W.C. Tuttle, a kind of rivalry begins between the two men. At first this rivalry takes the form of each of them acquiring more and more new furniture. Then Mr. Biswas suffers a setback when W.C. Tuttle takes out a life insurance policy. Mr. Biswas cannot take out a similar policy because he cannot afford to pay for it. Then a picture-war begins between the two men. Mr. Biswas buys some pictures, and after getting them framed, hangs them on his walls. W.C. Tuttle, in reply, hangs a large number of photographs of himself, his father, his mother, his brothers, his sisters, etc. on the walls of his rooms. One of the photographs shows W.C. Tuttle as a weight-lifter; another shows him in a Punjabi garb. However, it goes to the

credit of W.C. Tuttle that, when afterwards Anand wins a scholarship, the only ones to give the boy a present on his achievement are Mr. and Mrs. Tuttle.

His purchase of a House

Later in the story, W.C. Tuttle deals another blow to Mr. Biswas's prestige by buying a house of his own. Mr. Biswas takes the news of W.C. Tuttle's purchase of the house rather badly. Then comes the information that W.C. Tuttle is finding it difficult to get this house vacated by the old tenants who were in occupation of it. This information greatly pleases Mr. Biswas. But then comes the news that W.C. Tuttle has got his house vacated by having convinced the City Council that the house is dangerous and has to be repaired. The Tuttles then depart from Mrs. Tulsi's house where they had been living, and they depart without ceremony. Only Mrs. Tuttle kisses her sisters and those of the children who happen to be around her when she leaves. Later still, when Mr. Biswas too has got a house of his own, the Tuttles call upon Mr. Biswas and Shama. The Tuttles certainly compliment Mr. Biswas and Shama on having acquired a house, but Mrs. Tuttle inwardly feels very jealous of Shama at Shama's having achieved equality with Mrs. Tuttle. However, Mr. and Mrs. Tuttle have not been able to see through the reality of Mr. Biswas's house which is full of defects. They think that Mr. Biswas has acquired a really nice house, nice though small. Mrs. Tuttle tries to score a point over Shama by declaring that when her husband had bought a house he did not have to get into debt as Mr. Biswas has done.

28. SAVI

A Girl with Bow-Legs; Mr. Biswas's Favourite

Savi is the name of the eldest daughter of Mr. Biswas and Shama. This name had been given to her by Seth, against the wishes of Mr. Biswas who had thought of a number of other names out of which he would have selected one for the girl. Savi is Mr. Biswas's favourite child, and she remains a favourite even after the birth of the boy Anand. Savi is a girl having bow-legs. Her grandmother makes her wear heavy boots with long iron bands down the sides of her legs and straps over her knees in order to remedy the defect and to straighten her legs. She does not mind wearing this cumbersome device though Mr. Biswas objects to it. Savi is quite attached to her grandmother, though Mr. Biswas does not approve of this attachment because he himself harbours a hatred for that woman. One day when Savi complains that Granny is forcing her to eat fish which she does not like, Mr. Biswas tells the child to throw the fish away when Granny gives it to her to eat next time. Mr. Biswas then warns Shama not to allow Mrs. Tulsi to feed Savi all sorts of bad food; but Shama explains that fish is good for the brain. Mr. Biswas's

prejudice against Mrs. Tulsi prevents him from agreeing with Shama's view about fish. Mr. Biswas also objects to Mrs Tulsi's playfully calling Savi "the little paddler".

A Flogging For Her. The Gift of a Doll's House

On one occasion when Shama tries to teach Savi the art of tying her boot-laces, Savi fails to learn it. Shama repeatedly demonstrates the manner in which the laces should be tied, but Savi simply cannot learn the art. The consequence is that Savi gets a sound flogging from Shama. Savi is quite attached to her father. Having come to know that the signs in the Tulsi Store had been painted by her father when he used to be a sign-painter, Savi feels proud that those signs had been done by her father. However, one thing about those signs puzzles the little Savi. There is something gay about those signs, while her father is a morose kind of man. She cannot understand how a morose man like Mr. Biswas could have painted those gay signs. Once, at Christmas time, Mr. Biswas gives Savi the present of a doll's house. This doll's house becomes an object of curiosity for all the children in the house. But, as Mr. Biswas has given no present to any other child, the mothers of those children feel very annoyed with Mr. Biswas. Soon afterwards Shama, feeling harassed by the taunts of those mothers, breaks the doll's house and throws it on a heap of rubbish. Savi feels deeply grieved by the loss of her doll's house; and Mr. Biswas, on learning what had happened, rebukes Shama severely.

Her Miserable Stay at Green Vale

When Mr. Biswas is staying at Green Vale, he often feels lonely because Shama and the children frequently go to Hanuman House and spend long periods of time there. On one occasion Mr. Biswas takes Savi with him to Green Vale to stay with him. Savi goes readily, but she spends a miserable time there because she has no playmates and because Mr. Biswas spends the whole day away from the barracks, attending to his duties and thus leaving Savi alone in his room there. However, at night Mr. Biswas tries to entertain her by reading from novels, and to instruct her by explaining to her the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, and by making her learn the quotations hanging on the walls of the room. During her stay at Green Vale, Savi often feels afraid because Mr. Biswas suddenly seems to forget her and she hears him muttering to himself the word "trap" and the word "hole." (Mr. Biswas in his fits of depression often mutters to himself that he has been trapped by the Tulsi family into marrying Shama, and that now he finds himself in a hole).

A Scholarship and Then a Well-paid Job For Savi

Savi grows into an intelligent and talented girl. She wins a scholarship to enable her to pursue higher studies, and she goes

abroad. On her return, after having completed her studies, she gets an excellent job in Trinidad on a salary which her father could have never got in any capacity. Mr. Biswas, who has been feeling very depressed, almost desolate, during this time on account of his ill health, now finds much comfort in Savi's company. Savi learns to drive, and she often takes her father on little excursions. Mr. Biswas feels so comforted by Savi's company that in a letter to Anand he writes: "How can you not believe in God after this?"

29. ANAND

Anand's Early Life

Anand is the only son of Mr. Biswas and Shama, their other three children being all daughters. Anand is three years younger than Savi, the eldest of Mr. Biswas's progeny. Mr. Biswas becomes deeply interested in his son's welfare and devotes a lot of time and attention to the boy's upbringing, though he cannot do all that he would have liked to do because Shama and the children spend much of their time at Hanuman House when Mr. Biswas is living at The Chase or at Green Vale. Mr. Biswas keeps inquiring about the progress that Anand is making at school. On one occasion Mr. Biswas learns that Anand had become the butt of ridicule at school because he had not been able to use the toilet and had therefore created an ugly situation at school. In order to console the boy, Mr. Biswas narrates to him his own misadventure at Pundit Jairam's house. In reply Anand says that he would not like to go to his school again. Mr. Biswas asks the boy if he would like to go with him to Green Vale, but the boy makes no reply, thus conveying his wish not to go to Green Vale either.

A Growing Attachment Between Father and Son

Subsequently, when Mr. Biswas's whole family is on a visit to him at Green Vale, Anand decides to stay on with Mr. Biswas even after the others are getting ready to go back to Hanuman House. When afterwards Mr. Biswas asks the boy why he has chosen to stay with him, the boy's reply is that he did not want that his father should be left alone at Green Vale. Thus a kind of attachment has developed between Anand and his father. During Anand's stay at Green Vale, Mr. Biswas tries both to entertain him and to instruct him. Mr. Biswas teaches the boy the law of gravity, and speaks to him about the discoveries of the astronomers Copernicus and Galileo. When on a Saturday Seth comes there and suggests that Anand should go back to Hanuman House with him, tempting the boy with the ice-cream which he would get at Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas mentions the name of Galileo to Anand, whereupon Anand says that he would stay on at Green Vale. Thus Anand is evincing some interest in acquiring knowledge.

Anand's Terrible Experiences at Green Vale

During the period of Anand's stay at Green Vale, Mr. Biswas's growing despondency assumes serious proportions, and several other incidents also occur to make the boy feel uneasy. One night, for instance, Anand is awakened because Mr. Biswas has jumped out of bed screaming. On another occasion, somebody stabs Mr. Biswas's dog Tarzan to death, and the sight of the dog's dead body, with its belly ripped open, terrifies the boy. On this occasion Anand says that he does not want to stay here any longer and that he would like to go back home. The same night a storm begins to blow, and it begins to rain heavily. Mr. Biswas tells the boy to recite the names of Rama and Sita, and Anand does so. Seeing a procession of ants on the wall, Anand begins to kill some of them with the walking stick, but suddenly he begins to feel terrified of the tiny creatures. When the house shakes on account of thunder, Anand again chants the names of Rama and Sita. But the roar of thunder becomes louder and louder, whereupon Anand begins to scream. That night Mr. Biswas himself suffers a nervous breakdown. On the following day Mr. Biswas is carried to Hanuman House by Govind, while Anand walks the distance to Hanuman House.

His Experiences in Port of Spain. A Scholarship Won By Him

Years later, we find Anand going to school in the city of Port of Spain. Here he shows much promise, even though sometimes he wishes to avoid going to school and plays the truant. On one occasion when Anand goes for an outing with Mr. Biswas, Owad, and Shekhar, he gets nearly drowned in the sea. As a result of this terrible experience, Anand writes an account of what had happened. This piece of composition is thought to be so brilliant that the teacher gives Anand twelve marks out of ten. Anand's literary ability becomes the basis for Mr. Biswas to entertain high hopes of the future of the boy. Mr. Biswas now begins to take an even greater interest in Anand's studies. He makes arrangements for extra coaching for Anand so that the boy can prepare for the exhibition examination in an effort to win a scholarship. The father-son relationship now becomes a prominent theme in the novel. Father and son get close to each other, even though on one occasion Mr. Biswas finds it necessary to flog the boy. On another occasion, father and son go to see a cinema film but, as Mr. Biswas does not have enough money for the two full tickets which he is required to buy whereas he had thought that one full ticket and one half ticket would be needed, the son returns home without seeing the film and is soon followed by the father who had entered the cinema-hall with a ticket but had not felt like remaining there to see the film. Subsequently, Anand appears in the exhibition examination and, though at the time he says that he has not done well in the examination, he secures one of the top positions when the results are announced. As a rivalry has been going on between Anand and Vidiadhar (the son of Govind and Chinta), Anand's outstanding

success in the exhibition examination means a defeat and a humiliation for Vidiadhar who is not even able to obtain pass marks.

A Comic Figure

When Owad, on his return from his eight-year stay in England, begins to talk about his literary, artistic, and political views, Anand falls greatly under his influence. But the extent of this influence is determined by Owad's attitude towards him and by Owad's relations with Mr. Biswas. In the beginning Anand falls under Owad's influence to such an extent that he adopts all Owad's political and artistic views. Anand now declares at school that he is a Communist, and that he hates the poet T.S. Eliot. But, after having been snubbed by Owad in the course of a game of cards, Anand discards Owad's views though he subsequently apologizes to Owad and adopts those views again. After Mr. Biswas has quarrelled with Owad and Mrs. Tulsi and has decided to quit their house, Anand once again repudiates Owad's views. Anand's behaviour in the course of this entire episode is very amusing, and he appears to be more or less a comic figure here.

A Decline in Anand's Life

Subsequently, Anand wins another scholarship which enables him to go to England to pursue higher studies. But he is not able to maintain his progress in England. Mr. Biswas begins to receive gloomy letters from Anand and, although Mr. Biswas in reply writes to him humorous letters, the tone of Anand's letter does not change. Thus there is a considerable deterioration in Anand's prospects. Anand's intellectual and moral decline has a deeply depressing effect on Mr. Biswas's spirits; and this fact maybe one of the reasons for the two heart-attacks from which Mr. Biswas suffers. On one occasion Anand writes to say that he would soon be coming back to Trinidad, but later he changes his mind. When Mr. Biswas dies, Anand is still in England. What happens to him afterwards is anybody's guess.

30. VIDIADHAR

Vidiadhar is the son of Govind and Chinta. He is a class-fellow of Anand's, and he too prepares for the exhibition examination to compete for a scholarship, as does Anand. When the examination has taken place, Vidiadhar claims that he has done his papers remarkably well and that he is sure to win a scholarship. His mother Chinta, having implicit faith in her son's ability, believes him. However, when the results are announced, Vidiadhar's name does not figure anywhere, not even in the list of candidates who have barely passed, while Anand has secured one of the top positions. Vidiadhar's plight is now pitiable, though it is a source of

much amusement to us also. His mother is now deeply annoyed with him for having let her down so badly. In fact, Chinta is annoyed with everybody now and, in that state of mind, she abuses Shama, she abuses W.C. Tuttle, she abuses Anand and his sisters, and she accuses Mr. Biswas of having bribed the examiners. To her own son, Chinta says in a threatening voice that he would now have to live on bread and water only and that, if he speaks at all, she would cut his tongue. Then she slaps Vidiadhar, pulls his hair, and presses her fingers around his throat. Poor Vidiadhar is really in a jam. We feel sorry for him but we also laugh at him. After all, he is himself responsible for his predicament. He had given out that he had done his papers in the examination excellently when in actual fact he had made a mess of his answer-papers.

31. MR. BURNETT

A Newspaper Editor

Mr. Burnett is the editor of the newspaper called the *Trinidad Sentinel* when Mr. Biswas goes to Port of Spain and begins his search for a job. Mr. Burnett first appoints Mr. Biswas a part-time sign-painter at the newspaper office and then promotes him to the post of a newspaper-reporter. Mr. Burnett wants Mr. Biswas to write sensational reports which can shock the reading public. Mr. Biswas tries his hand at writing such reports but Mr. Burnett keeps telling Mr. Biswas that he is not yet quite satisfied. At last one day, when Mr. Biswas writes a report about a father being brought home to his family in a coffin, Mr. Burnett feels perfectly satisfied, saying that the story written by Mr. Biswas has not only shocked him but chilled him with horror. This story certainly increases the circulation of the *Trinidad Sentinel* temporarily and leads to Mr. Biswas's promotion, but the newspaper management does not approve of Mr. Burnett's editorial policies and serves him with a notice. Mr. Burnett then quits Trinidad and sails away to America to try his luck there. The *Trinidad Sentinel* reports his departure on its society page and publishes an unkind photograph of him. In the photograph he is seen as feeling uncomfortable in a dinner jacket, his small eyes popping in the flash of the camera and a cigar stuck in his mouth as if for comic effect. After Mr. Burnett's departure, the newspaper management brings about radical changes in the policies of their newspaper. Mr. Burnett gets a job in America and settles down there. From America he writes a letter to Mr. Biswas, but Mr. Biswas, though sincerely wishing to reply to Mr. Burnett, does not find the time to do so.

32. MRS. LOGIE

Mr. Biswas's Boss in the Community Welfare Department

Mrs. Logie appears in the story only towards the end of the novel. She is the head of the Community Welfare Department

which has newly been established by the government. She is described as a tall, energetic woman in her late middle age. She is not a pompous or aggressive woman as women in authority are generally inclined to be. She has the feminine graces and she is particularly kind towards Mr. Biswas whom she appoints a Community Welfare Officer in her department. Mrs. Logie shows a lot of interest in Mr. Biswas out of the sheer kindness of her heart, and she expresses a desire to meet his family too. She then takes Mr. Biswas and his whole family to a seaside resort for a picnic, placing her Buick car and her chauffeur at their disposal. However, after a time, the government abolishes this department, with the result that Mr. Biswas loses his job and has to revert to his original job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Mr. Logie's role in the novel is negligible.

33. THE SOLICITOR'S CLERK

The House of the Solicitor's Clerk On Sale

The solicitor's clerk is the man who tricks Mr. Biswas into buying a house in Sikkim Street. Having somehow come to know that Mr. Biswas urgently needs some residential accommodation, the solicitor's clerk contacts Mr. Biswas in a cafe whither Mr. Biswas had gone for some refreshments. The solicitor's clerk invites Mr. Biswas to lunch in a nearby Chinese restaurant. In the course of the lunch, the solicitor's clerk says that he is living with his mother in his own house which is situated in Sikkim Street but that his mother finds living in that house to be very inconvenient because, having developed heart trouble, she cannot climb up to the upper storey of the house. The solicitor's clerk also says that he has now to shift to some other house and that he has, in fact, been offered a house in another locality where his mother, to whom he refers again and again as "the old queen", can live on the ground floor. But, says the solicitor clerk, he has first to sell his house in Sikkim Street in order to be able to buy the other house. Being in dire need of accommodation, Mr. Biswas agrees to go with the solicitor's clerk to take a look at his house. Mr. Biswas then drives in pouring rain in the company of the solicitor's clerk to Sikkim Street to see the house. Mr. Biswas is greatly impressed by the elegant look of the house. The solicitor's clerk says that he would sell the house for six thousand dollars; but the bargain is struck at five thousand and five hundred dollars.

The Solicitor's Clerk, a Cheat, a Fraud, a Speculator

Mr. Biswas had failed to inspect the house closely. Afterwards he and Shama discover many structural defects in the house. Mr. Biswas feels so enraged with the solicitor's clerk, who has obviously duped him, that he begins to abuse that man. He describes the solicitor's clerk as a jerry-builder. He refers to that man as a "tout,"

as a "crook", as a "Nazi", and as a "blasted Communist". Subsequently, a neighbour informs Mr. Biswas that the solicitor's clerk is a "real cheat," a "fraud," a "speculator," who had made it a regular practice to build ramshackle, fragile houses and give them a decent look in order to be able to sell them at a big profit. Later, one day, the solicitor's clerk appears in Sikkim Street again. The man is now planning to build another house in this very locality. When Mr. Biswas learns the object of the visit of the solicitor's clerk, he becomes indignant and tells the solicitor's clerk that he would be able to build a second house in this locality only upon the dead body of Mr. Biswas. Realizing that Mr. Biswas would not allow him to build another house in this locality in order to be able to cheat some other unsuspecting customer, the solicitor's clerk beats a retreat.

“A House for Mr. Biswas” : Critical Approaches

I

The Frustration of Energy and Ambition

One major thematic strand runs through all the novels of V.S. Naipaul whether set in the West Indies or in England; they are satiric demonstrations of individual and social limitations. The social condition that Naipaul represents in his novels is shoddy and limiting, offering little more than an absurd or ridiculous existence. Repeatedly he shows the frustration of energy and ambition. “Success” is the reward of trickery, vulgar materialism, self-delusion, or the values of the colonial ‘monkey game’. For the individual, rebellion or non-acquiescence proves a largely futile exercise.

The Theme of Personal Failure

The theme of personal failure dominates all of Naipaul’s work after *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958). The very process of defeat itself suggests the inevitable, that the outcome of effort could not have been otherwise than as demonstrated. Whether this inevitability is stated as in *The Mimic Men* (1967) or suggested, by the persistent recurrence of failure in *Miguel Street* (1919), and through imagery and symbol in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), it is a recurring motif in the later novels.

The Author’s Cold Detachment

In his satiric presentation of characters Naipaul rarely allows himself to show a humane understanding of their weaknesses. He tends to set his people at a distance and usually invites an analytically detached response from the reader. The cold detachment with

which he can present human shortcomings is a measure of the brutality of his wit and at times makes reading his work rather like a clinical exercise. Yet, that he does have the ability to convey sympathy while at the same time being satiric is evident from his portrayal of B. Wordsworth, Laura, and Hat in *Miguel Street*. As a whole, the series of sketches in this book evidences a human warmth and a vitality that are hardly to be found anywhere else in Naipaul's work.

II

Naipaul's Disappointment With India

Naipaul's early views can be seen as part of the continuing conflict found in all societies between those who seek a better world abroad and those who stay at home and find sufficient cultural nourishment in their local community. He appears to be a writer who has preferred exile to home, but continues to write about home and its problems. Home, however, is rather different for Naipaul than for most writers. He is a product of three cultures : the West Indies, India, and England. For many years he thought of home not as England but as India. The fantasy he mocks of the West Indian dreaming of being an Aryan horseman on the northern Indian mountains was his own. While other writers have attempted to set down roots in London, Paris, or Accra, Naipaul attempted to settle in India. The experience of that failure is recorded in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), where Naipaul discovers that, despite his Indian upbringing, he is essentially western. The East shocks him with its disregard for individual dignity, its fatalism, its mystical retreat from reality, its lack of energy and its preference for myths to actualities. He is shocked by Indian uncleanness, feudalism, and disregard for facts. Where he had expected a land of achievements based on a long tradition, he found a fractured culture, the vitality of which had ended before the English conquest and which was now a mixture of mimicry of western ideas with an oriental resignation to fate and self-absorption in timeless spiritual destiny. The contradictions, incompetence, and ritualism which might charm tourists left him angered. Another home had failed. Naipaul compared his search for identity with a piece of patterned cloth that one unweaves to trace the figures and that ends by being a heap of tangled threads.

III

The Dual Character of "A House For Mr. Biswas"

V.S. Naipaul's early novels primarily treat of the confusions in Hindu society in Trinidad, both the ossification of a culture into ritual and the loss of traditional culture within a multi-racial society. It would be possible to rearrange the subject-matter of Naipaul's fiction into a selected but chronological history of the fortunes of the Trinidadian Hindu community. *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) traces

a life from the isolated, totally Indian rural community of the first decade of the 20th century through its gradual contact with a larger society, culminating for Mr. Biswas in his rise to becoming a reporter and house-owner in urban, multi-racial Port of Spain. The later part of the novel is concerned with the education of children, which allows Mr. Biswas's son to earn scholarships to study in England. If the novel is a success story of immigrant life and New World assimilation, it also records the failure of Hindu culture to survive in the West Indies.

Two Earlier Novels

Naipaul, whose family has been influential in Trinidadian politics and Indian cultural movements, has often written of the lack of future of the East Indian community in the Caribbean; such despair is behind the social comedy of *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958). Both novels treat of the electoral process. The life of Pundit Ganesh, in *The Mystic Masseur*, can be seen as a humorous success story during a time of social and political change, but it also illustrates a rapid deterioration of Hindu culture which, historically, parallels the movement towards self-government in the colony. If Pundit Ganesh is a colourful figure, he is without cultural or moral standards. He unashamedly surrounds himself with symbols from many religions when he seeks business as a faith healer; he appeals to Hindu nationalism, however, to win an election. After a period as a radical firebrand, he becomes a supporter of the colonial government and receives a knighthood. Similarly, the election in *The Suffrage of Elvira* is marked by the buying of votes and other forms of sharp dealing. Although religious practices have become creolised*, a confused stew** of various beliefs, symbols and practices, each ethnic group votes as a block.

IV

The Indian Community in Trinidad, and Other Ethnic Groups

For Naipaul the West Indies consists of races that have been uprooted from their original society and that have not produced a new culture to replace what was lost. They have been abandoned on Trinidad, with little in common and without the various resources needed to create an energetic new society. There is no creativity, no achievement; the middle classes are parasites, mimicking the ideas and activities of metropolitan societies; each group or race continues to think of foreign lands as "home". Although Naipaul's early fiction is centred on the Indian community, it is clear from his non-fiction that he saw the other ethnic groups in analogous

*Creolised—"Creol" is the name given to a descendant of a European or Negro settler in West Indies.

**Sew—a dish cooked by long simmering in a closed vessel. Here the word simply means a "mixture".

situations. The European settlers drank and ate grossly, were uninterested in education and the arts, and created nothing; as a result their only claim to status was their race. The brown middle class copied the English and was uninterested in Africa. In *The Middle Passage* (1962) and *The Loss of Eldorado* (1965) Naipaul sees slavery as one historical cause which determined the limited development of the region. Slavery left a heritage of distinctions based rather on racial pride than on individual or group achievement; it left those of African descent cut off from any viable cultural traditions but desirous of the privileges of European status which they were denied. The linked short stories in *Miguel Street* (1959) show a society of failures, in which nothing is achieved and in which eccentricity, brutality, and violence are the usual means of asserting identity in a small, impoverished colony. The young narrator at first wants to be one of the gang and finds their eccentricity and big talk interesting. As he grows up he begins to understand that the code of the street masks communal and individual failure.

V

The Tensions of an Individual

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* Naipaul explores the tensions of an individual trapped in such a society through a series of powerful and evocative metaphors. Biswas's fate defines the limits of possibility Naipaul sees in the West Indian situation, its positive and its negative extremities. After this for him and for his characters there is nothing left but flight and denial.

The Implications of Mr. Biswas's Joining the Tulsi Household

Mohun Biswas, the novel's hero, is a Trinidadian Indian whose sole advantage lies in his Brahmin status. Marked out for misfortune from his birth by omen and circumstance we begin to sense in him a figure who, in accordance with Naipaul's general ideas, is indeed unfortunate in his time and place. His childhood unfolds as a series of daydreams, punctuated by sores, illnesses, and occasional brief moments of glory when his Brahmin status makes him desirable to flesh out a ceremony or ritual; moments which only serve to underline the unreal nature of caste and custom in this society. Throughout the story of his childhood the omniscient narrator often jumps forward to episodes not yet related, or makes comparisons with later occasions in Biswas's life which the reader has not yet encountered, as if to stress the limitations inherent in the hero's situation from the beginning. Referring to one of the ceremonial occasions at which Mr. Biswas's Brahminical presence is required the narrator comments :

...as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer's son...And throughout life his position was like that.

As one of the Tulsi sons-in-law and as a journalist he found himself among people with money...but always, at the end, he returned to his crowded, shabby room.

Ambitious in an undirected way, Mr. Biswas, as he is referred to throughout, takes up sign-painting. A job at Hanuman House, the store-cum-tribal-home of the Tulsi family leads him into the clutches of old Mrs. Tulsi (Mai), a widow, overblessed with daughters, whom she marries off with little care except for the proprieties of Hindu caste law. The sons-in-law she acquires in this way provide the overseers and work-force for the family. Mr. Biswas's Brahmin status meeting the Tulsi needs, he is quickly bullied into marriage with one of the daughters and joins the Tulsi circus. Mr. Biswas is immediately aware in an undefined way that by becoming part of the Tulsi household he has sacrificed his liberty and his future, and yet he is also seduced by the security and certainty which this surrender brings as reward. He solves his problem by accepting the latter, and kicking against the pricks by a hundred and one small acts of defiance and disrespect which quickly brings him the name of trouble-maker and disturber of the peace.

VI

The Break-up of the Tulsi Household

The great rambling Tulsi household, ill-defined and yet curiously hierarchical; eclectic in religious practice, yet noisily pious; generous within limits, yet unrelenting in its demands, is a single, comprehensive, brilliantly evoked metaphor for the traditional Indian community. Against this world Biswas struggles to maintain an independence, swinging between anger at its blandishment and emotional blackmail, and self-recrimination against his own ingratitude and obvious inability to survive alone. Against the traditional, static Tulsi values Mr. Biswas hurls a stream of revolutionary ideas: economic independence; caste-reform; self-help; and love-marriage. Throughout his life he tries to escape the Tulsi embrace, as a field overseer, and later, as a hack-journalist and a social welfare worker. But, although he manages to establish areas of independence he can never completely break away from the household, and must submit to his wife and children remaining tied to the Tulsi menage,* a condition he can only view obscurely as a form of betrayal. In this struggle the idea of a house of his own becomes an obsession, a symbol of an independence that always eludes him. Yet Mr. Biswas's struggle against the Tulsi values is never complete. He is always, despite himself, seduced into a resentful admiration of its vigour and warmth. Soon that world begins to disintegrate. The sons of Mrs. Tulsi, the household gods of the establishment, are alienated by education and travel; and Seth, the economic lynch-pin, is driven from the household. Mr. Biswas's reaction is a mixture of satisfaction and fear. Although he has

* *Mengae*—a domestic establishment.

scorned the Tulsi values, he has always depended on them as a reassuring reality against which he can oppose his own schemes and day-dreams, and to which he can always return, chastened if undefeated, when they fail to work out. Now that reality is fading there is nothing effective he can visualize to take its place. The break-up of the Tulsi world is not presented in isolation. It is shown as part of the general and widespread changes in the island brought about by war. The American soldiers and their bases bring a new, fluid economic atmosphere to the islands and a social mobility not dependent on race, caste, or family patronage. Ironically, this is the world Mr. Biswas has advocated; the independent, self-reliant ideal he nourishes in his crowded room as he thumbs through his copies of Samuel Smiles and Marcus Aurelius, his talismans against the Tulsi world. But when it arrives, Mr. Biswas is unable to accommodate it, or it him.

VII

The Symbolic Force of the Portrayal of Mr. Biswas

Mr. Biswas remains tied to the Tulsi world because, despite his wishes, he remains a side-shoot of those values, aberrant but still rooted in the same stock. In a way he is a representative figure of a generation caught between the security of the old world and the possibilities of the new, a man trapped in the transitional phase between two worlds. But he is also more than that. Naipaul has invested the figure of Mr. Biswas with a symbolic force which over-spills social and historical bounds. In a hundred tiny strokes he builds Mr. Biswas into a figure whose dreams embody those of all men struggling to define an identity and to resist conformity to social habit and custom. Mr. Biswas is man as artist (his sign-painting, his abortive short stories), as religious reformer (his theological brushes with Hari), as social rebel (his brushes with authority in all forms), and, perhaps pre-eminently, as jester. Above all Mr. Biswas is comic. His man-child precociousness; his awful practical jokes; his lugubrious and wordy humour, have the comic pathos we associate with the great, traditional clowns, inept and yet wise thorns in the world's side. In Mr. Biswas, Naipaul has succeeded in balancing his compassion for the West Indian people and his sense of the grotesque, farcical comedy of their condition and has created a figure in which comic ineptitude is a badge of humanity, not a sign of cultural primitiveness. Mr. Biswas's failings are presented as the failings of man in all times and places, his problems and his dreams as common to all humanity, and not as in Naipaul's earlier work as the special grotesque marks which characterize the West Indian. Thus Biswas can answer his son Anand's query "Who are you?" with the unconscious wisdom of the human clown in all ages: "I am just somebody. Nobody at all, I am just a man you know." And like man he recognizes that his limitation is his strength and that within these limitations his own creativity and imagination

is a force which mirrors the creative force of God himself. As Mr. Biswas's life unfolds we recognize that his dreams and his weakness, his hopes and his failures are an effective chart of the stretches and limits of the human imagination.

VIII

Mr. Biswas does not revolt against established customs because of social or political beliefs, which is why he can no more accommodate the new values than the old. His revolt is against any value system which denies the intrinsic importance of man and the autonomous power of the individual to renew the experience of the race through the experience of his own life. What Biswas stands for is the human right to fail in one's own unique way and because of this, although at the end of his life he dies in possession of only a caricature of his dream of responsibility and freedom, a house, shamelessly and cunningly jerry-built, foisted on him by deception, the reader remains deeply aware of the heroism and importance of his struggle and what it represents. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* Naipaul has found in the West Indian reality the material for a unique and powerful statement about the human condition. It is, perhaps, the tragedy of this troubled and brilliant writer that he has been unable to accept what he has discovered.

IX

Mr. Biswas Versus Hanuman House

For Mr. Biswas grew up in a more liberal and changing environment than that which obtained at Hanuman House. And here, the definition of the role played by Hanuman House in the creation of that system Naipaul chooses to call "Tulsidom" is very important. Hanuman House was founded by a pundit, a Hindu priest, a venerable man not only in Trinidad but also in India, an immigrant who had not come as an indentured* labourer, one of the rare Indians in Trinidad who knew his relatives in India and was in constant touch with them. As head of the Tulsi clan in Trinidad, he provides, after the style of the princely great houses of India, a sanctuary for succeeding generations of the family. It is perhaps the fault of nature and of circumstances that a cultural anomaly arises out of this, for it is the Tulsi sons and their wives who should have populated the house, but Pundit Tulsi and his wife apparently had more daughters than sons, and since the daughters were either older or less educated than the sons, they married earlier. Furthermore, nearly all of the Tulsi daughters seem to have married men in need of Tulsi money and prestige who were glad for a space at Hanuman House. In addition, Hanuman House was a virtual cloister for the Tulsi family, as outsiders were rarely admitted. On

the other hand, Biswas was the descendant of hut-dwelling peasants. And although the extended family was operative in Mr. Biswas's personal experience previous to his encounter with the Tulsis, the absence of a single family house made arrangements looser. For instance, Bipti, although dependent on Tara, stays with "some of Tara's husband's dependent relations in a back trace" far from Ajodha's house; Pratap and Prasad go to a distant relation in another town; Dehuti lives as a maid with Tara; and Biswas, although living with his mother, becomes emotionally estranged from her. His father's hut is no more, his grand-parents are dead, and he early begins his picaresque-like journey* through life. He experiences the comparative cosmopolitanism of primary school life; he then undergoes the rigid discipline of a pundit-in-training for a brief period, but abandons this for the insecurities and vagabondage of a sign-painting career, so that before he encounters Tulsidom he has met not only a few people of other races, like his friend Alec, but also Indians like himself, yet subscribing to non-traditional mores, like Lal, his Christian school-teacher, and Bhandat and his sons who have un-Hindu sex lives. With all this, his little education has excited his curiosity and, on afternoons at Ajodha's, his eyes and mind would zealously explore the new worlds opened up to him by the "Book of Comprehensive Knowledge."

Hanuman House As A Symbol

No wonder then that Mr. Biswas felt "trapped" when he fell into the clutches of Tulsidom, for Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility (to its inmates), ritual duty, hierarchy and communal life.

X

Mr. Biswas's Efforts to Achieve Independence

A House for Mr. Biswas—his best novel, to my mind—is long, leisurely, and episodic. It reminds one of the era of magazine serialization, and it is so quietly conducted that, although its themes do achieve resolution in dramatic terms, the climax might virtually be misread as a dying fall. Mohun Biswas is poor. Among other jobs, he works as a journalist—a menial profession for the most part, it seems, in Trinidad. He likes to lie in vest and pants on his slumbering mattress, his calves swinging like hammocks: this image of abdication, of pensive dereliction, is dwelt on affectionately, and contrasts with the elaborate story of his efforts to make a living and secure his independence, to win free of his wife's family, the dynasty of the Tulsis.

His Failures and Frustrations

His birth and childhood are besieged by bad omens, and the local pundit shakes his empty head over his prospects. Half-accidentally,

*Picaresque-like journey—a wandering life like that of a vagabond.

Mr. Biswas marries one of the Tulsi girls before he has settled to a job. A future of subjection to the Tulsis, and of attendance at their emporium and on their estates, seems to be closing in. He escapes to mind a store of his own in the depths of the country, and fails to prosper. He invokes the law, in the shape of the redoubtable and invisible advocate Seebaran, to force his savage neighbours to pay their dues, and, in a sequence of superb farce, gets badly stung. He moves to one of the Tulsi estates, and the little house he labours to have built is battered to the ground in a storm. The scene in which he and his son lie crouched in a swamped and disintegrating bedroom is terrifying and harrowing: the image of the disgraced father whose son shrinks from him has great power for Naipaul.

Condition of Dependency, Broken At Last

He rejoins the inexorable Tulsis, to whom his wife retreats at times of estrangement, and they all proceed to a pastoral setting not far from Port of Spain. The dynasty is still stiflingly intact; they are still upholders of religious orthodoxy and social convention, though they are running short of money. Mr. Biswas is now a writer of bright feature articles, a trade that seems to suit the new, Americanized Trinidad. Eventually, he arrives in Port of Spain itself, a far from triumphal entry, and at long last he contrives to have a house built. It turns out to be jerry-built, but it's a house. He falls ill and dies. But he has succeeded in breaking his condition of dependency.

XI

The Personality of Mr. Biswas, Carefully Portrayed

The personality of Mr. Biswas is carefully gauged. He is irascible and highly strung, often at fault in his quarrels with his wife Shama, with her martyr's ways. He is like Mr. Micawber: a joker who is also a joke; his life is also brave and tenacious. His wit generates a play of humour which fills the novel: this, too, is a comedy, but of a different cast from Naipaul's early books. The character of Mr. Biswas is achieved in passion and appears to constitute an act of piety. It is significant that his situation strongly resembles that of the narrator's father in Naipaul's new novel, *The Mimic Men*. He, too, is threatened and occluded by his association with his wife's wealthy and aggressive family; he, too, breaks free, by becoming, abruptly and bizarrely, a religious leader of a scabrous and subversive kind. Such situations of dependency and emergence, of servitude and revolt, are of the utmost consequence in Naipaul's work; they are both literal and distinctly metaphoric, and sharply qualify its aloof and Brahminical tendencies, its dandyish refusal of politics and proclaimed reform.

Nothing About the Public Affairs of Trinidad

Mr. Biswas hasn't a lot to say about the public affairs of Trinidad, or about its recent history. If this is a newly independent country, the reader is not always aware of it. Its hero's vulnerability, on the other hand, his exposure to the Tulsis, his membership in the stranded expatriate community of the Trinidad Hindus, can be read as an expression of the colonial relation. The history of most emergent countries can look like a chapter of accidents, and in the same way Mr. Biswas's bid for self-sufficiency often appears cranky and calamitous. Naipaul's devotion to his character's lifelong career of personal emancipation may be thought to put the case for political autonomy as well as it has been put. There are times when his writings might seem to lack a credible view of the colonial past, of the old order. Yet the order is vividly implied in the story of Mr. Biswas's enslavement to his in-laws.

XII

Mr. Biswas's Cantankerousness and His Insignificance

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* Naipaul intensifies and carries further the method of inflation evident in *The Mystic Masseur*. The circumstances of Biswas's birth set him apart from other characters in the novel, but the particularity and importance which he has in their eyes is preserved by Naipaul, ironically, long after Hanuman House justifiably concludes that Biswas "mattered little". The action of the novel demonstrates how finally unimportant Biswas is, how futile, and even petty, are his gestures of non-acquiescence. He often displays a petty cantankerousness at Hanuman House and gives himself over to action that is a pathetic substitute for real rebellion: the food flung out of the window on to Owad's head; the carping names he devises for members of the Tulsi household. It is with some justification that Shama, Biswas's wife, describes him as a "barking puppy dog". Hanuman House finally reacts to Biswas as to the insignificant, fixing his status without great effort. The frustrating, largely inescapable experience of Biswas, the fact that he is swindled and repeatedly defeated by society, suggests that the character is really a man who is utterly unimportant except to himself. Yet, ironically, Naipaul's mode of portrayal seems to be taking Biswas as if he were an important, famous, public personage. The portentousness of the full-scale, formal, biographical treatment of Biswas thus becomes a satiric device that mocks the ineffectiveness of the character and his ultimate compromising of an ideal. The cold detachment which Naipaul preserves through the sardonically grandiose presentation of Biswas induces the reader to set little store by what the character does achieve. It even seems to cheapen Biswas's insight in recognizing some of the limitations of his social environment, his courage in wanting to rebel against it, and his resilience in trying to achieve something worthwhile to himself, even

if the attempts are largely futile, Naipaul, perhaps too obviously, puts his thumb on the scale to pull down the balance against Biswas's struggle.

XIII

A Hero Without Heroic Proportions

It is a mark of the brilliance in the creation of Mr. Biswas that he defies simple classification. Quite understandably, too, this character has drawn easily more critical attention than any other of Naipaul's protagonists. The designation "hero" is avoided at this point because in the minds of some critics there are reservations about his heroic proportions. It is true that none of Mr. Biswas's individual acts is of much significance by itself. He is an unimportant man who in many ways is even petty, but the complete story of his life turns out to be greater than the sum of its mundane parts. In fact, Gordon Rohlehr detects universal implications in the terms of his highly personal struggle.

Mr. Biswas, an Everyman

Biswas is an Everyman, wavering between identity and non-entity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of them. If Biswas represents all the things I feel he does, it is because he is fully presented as a person whose very quirk and idiosyncrasy we know, in a world whose every sight, sound, and smell is recorded with fidelity and precision. Whatever is suggested of the numinous and universal, is conveyed through a fidelity to the concrete and particular. Landscape and life are not treated as isolated, but both conform to the artist's unity of purpose.

Everyman's Problems, Needs, and Frustrations

According to this estimate, it appears that the realism that is sometimes attributable to "local colour" in earlier works has become in the fourth book a necessary "fidelity to the concrete and particular." Authentic features of the West Indian scene are conscientiously preserved—dialect, customs, natural setting—but the individuals depicted are first of all human beings and in spite of obvious superficial differences are like middle- and lower-class people the world over. They have the same problems, feel the same driving needs, and suffer the same frustrations.

14

Important Questions with Complete Answers

Q. 1. *A House for Mr. Biswas* has been regarded as a novel depicting the rebellion of a mediocre, ridiculous man. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

Or

Discuss the themes of rebellion and independence as treated by Naipaul in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

A House for Mr. Biswas can be read as a book which probes the relationship between rebellion and independence. Discuss this view about Naipaul's novel.

Or

"Biswas's rebellion can be read as the rebellion of an individual against a communal way of life." Discuss.

An Absurd Man Who is Also a Rebellious Man

Mr. Biswas in Naipaul's novel is surely a mediocre type of man. He is by no means a hero in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, he is a kind of anti-hero, despite his strong self-respect and his refusal to surrender his independence at any stage in the course of his career. There is much that is absurd and ridiculous about him. Like Oedipus, he is fated to kill his father, but he fulfils this prophecy in the most ridiculous way. His father is drowned in a pool in the course of his attempt to rescue him when he is actually hiding under a bed at home. There could be nothing more absurd than this kind of death. Later on, Mr. Biswas is to be the Scarlet Pimpernel for a newspaper stunt, and has to read Samuel Smiles's tracts on the dignity of labour and the virtue of being a self-made man. It is the

nearest he comes to achieving a heroic status. At his birth it was predicted that he would grow into a liar, a lecher, and a spendthrift. He does not become a lecher at all. Poverty prevents him from becoming a spendthrift; and he proves to be a liar only in a very narrow and limited sense. However, he cannot get away from his sense of his own littleness. Riding on his bicycle, moving many times with his cumbersome furniture, aware of the bitter irony of his position as an investigator of deserving destitutes when he is himself a deserving destitute, he is the absurd man. But he is also the rebellious man because he is persistent in his desire to understand life and to make/sense of his social environment. Naipaul's novel depicts the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man, a rebellion which originates from the man's strong desire for independence. It is this desire for independence, and the rebellion to which it leads, that make him a hero despite his absurdity and mediocrity. He has no special talent; he is incapable of any commendable enterprise or initiative; he hardly shows any business or commercial competence; he is no judge of human character; even his literary ability is strictly limited because, as a writer of short stories, he can hardly go beyond the opening sentence. But what makes him heroic is his integrity as a human being; he wins our respect by his self-respect. His unflinching sense of humour, his capacity for bitter sarcasm, and his biting wit further add to his stature.

The Tulsi Family, the Target of His Rebellion

As an Indian in the Trinidad of the 1930's, Mr. Biswas feels insecure and needs the support of the family or the clan. At no time in the book is he, or any of the Tulsis, able to come to any meaningful compromise with the Creole world. When he marries into the Tulsi family, he is offered protection. He gets the sort of job which he could hardly get anywhere else in view of his limited abilities and his lack of dynamism and originality. Yet he rebels and he makes the Tulsis the target of his rebellion. To understand this rebellion we have first to understand the social organization of Hanuman House. On the surface this organization is perfect. Hanuman House has its leaders in Mrs. Tulsi and Seth; it has its scheme of prescribed duties and responsibilities for its daughters and its sons-in-law; it has its religious ceremonies and rituals; and it tries to provide every inmate with the kind of work which suits his or her aptitude and inclination. That being so, Mr. Biswas's rebellion would seem to be an act of insolence and defiance which cannot be justified.

Hanuman House, A Picture of a Slave Society

But, on a closer examination, we find that Hanuman House, far from providing a congenial atmosphere and a favourable environment for its growing young men and young women, presents a picture of a slave society. This slave society has been built up by the widowed Mrs. Tulsi, and her brother-in-law Seth. These two leaders need workers to maintain their domestic and business empire. They exploit the homelessness and poverty of their kinsfolk,

the members of their family, and any other Hindus of high castes whom they can rope in. In this slave society men are necessary only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and as labourers on the Tulsi estate. To agree to live in Hanuman House and to work on one of the Tulsi estates is to accept slavery. The Tulsi daughters have no alternative except to live under the patronage of their mother and their uncle. It is only late in the novel that education comes to be regarded as a means of liberation from Hanuman House because only through education can an Indian claim equality with the Creoles and can compete with them in the wider society of Trinidad. The Tulsi daughters, in the course of the major portion of the novel, are inseparably bound to the rhythms and rituals of life in Hanuman House—the daily *pūja*, the seasonal wedding, the occasional funeral. The rituals provide them with relief from the dullness and the submissiveness of their daily lives. The daughters have hardly any voice in the running of Hanuman House. They simply scramble for the favours of Mrs. Tulsi and for the crumbs of authority which may filter down to them from her. Indeed, competition for favours from Mrs. Tulsi (or Mai) is very keen.

Mr. Biswas's Refusal to Obey the Tulsi Code of Conduct

Mrs. Tulsi is keenly aware of the need of remaining at the centre of her daughters' consciousness. She is a powerful mother-figure, and rules the household through her understanding of the psychology of slavery. She is constantly demanding love and worship, and is very skilful at counterfeiting illnesses on appropriate occasions in order to create feelings of guilt in those who have failed in their worship of her. She maintains an elaborate system of rules according to which the daughters and others in the household find it easy to offer their devotion to her, but Mr. Biswas, the enemy of ritual, and a man with an independent mind, does not submit to those rules. He refuses to obey the established code of conduct in the house. In other words, he proves to be a bad slave because he refuses to feel grateful to Mrs. Tulsi or to Seth or to the two gods (namely, the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi) for being dependent on them for his livelihood.

Seth-Mai Partnership

Mrs. Tulsi or Mai is only one part of the power-structure of Hanuman House. She cannot rule alone. She needs Seth who is equally powerful as a father-figure. Mrs. Tulsi has divided power among her daughters, and has given to them an illusion of freedom and democratic rights; through them she partially controls their husbands. But still she needs Seth to complete and fulfil the psychological requirements of slave-ownership. Both she and Seth believe that discipline in the household is necessary and that they must maintain their hold upon all the inmates of Hanuman House. Seth may be regarded as an allegorical representation of power. He

wears big military boots; he dons a khaki uniform; he has big hands and square fingers; he has a hearty, boisterous manner; he has a sense of humour too; and he dominates the scene. But he cannot rule without Mrs. Tulsi just as she cannot rule without him: it is together that they can fulfil the psychology of dominance and rulership.

Mr. Biswas's Refusal to Apologize For His Defiant Talk

Seth is aided in his job of preserving order by the husbands who accept their position of subservience. The foremost of these is Govind who becomes a kind of policeman for both Seth and Mai. Govind is tall and well-built. Mr. Biswas makes a mistake in thinking that Govind is a fellow-sufferer like himself and that Govind's support against the Tulsis can be enlisted by him. Far from being discontented with his lot, Govind suggests to Mr. Biswas that the latter should give up sign-painting and should take up a job on the Tulsi estate. Mr. Biswas's reply to Govind's suggestion is that by giving up his sign-painting he would be giving up his independence which he is not prepared to surrender. His motto, says Mr. Biswas, is: "Paddle your own canoe"; and he begins to quote from a poem in *Bell's Standard Elocutionist*. He says that the Tulsis are "blood-suckers" adding that he would rather catch crabs or sell coconuts than work for the Tulsis. Govind reports Mr. Biswas's views to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth whereupon Mr. Biswas is summoned and rebuked for his defiant talk. Mr. Biswas has earlier described Mrs. Tulsi as "the old hen" and as "the old cow", and has mockingly referred to Seth as "the Big Boss", in the course of his conversations with his wife Shama. He has described Shama's two brothers as the gods in the house. Now, when one of the gods demands that Mr. Biswas should offer an apology to Mai, Mr. Biswas loses his temper and says that the whole pack of them can go to hell and that he is not going to apologize to any one of them. He declares that he would leave the house and begins to pack the few belongings which he can call his own. However, his anger cools down quickly and he is dissuaded from leaving by Seth's wife Padma and Govind's wife Chinta.

Mr. Biswas, Disgraced For His Continuing Rebelliousness

Although Mr. Biswas does not leave Hanuman House at this stage, his rebelliousness does not cease. On the contrary, he becomes even more rebellious, and his rebelliousness takes highly offensive forms. He adopts the reformist views of the Arya Samaj and shocks the orthodox Tulsi household by openly advocating those views. In this particular case, however, Seth has the better of him because Seth brings the news that the Arya Samaj missionary from India has been found to be a corrupt man who tried to make love to the daughter-in-law of the very man in whose house he was staying as an honoured guest. Then Mr. Biswas offends the Tulsi household by speaking favourably of Christianity. In this case, too, he is on a strong ground because the Tulsi sons are wearing crucifixes and are attending a

Roman Catholic college for their education. But Mr. Biswas's rebellion becomes most aggressive and unbearable when he throws a plateful of food from the window over Owad's head. Not only that, he gargles out of the window and allows the water to fall upon Owad's head. This misconduct on Mr. Biswas's part provokes Govind to give a thrashing to Mr. Biswas. The sight of Mr. Biswas being beaten by Govind gives much pleasure to Owad, and Mr. Biswas really feels very small at this time. A little later Mr. Biswas consoles himself with eating oysters and tinned salmon at a shop away from the house. Mr. Biswas has been disgraced, but this very disgrace becomes also the means of his release from Hanuman House. He is now sent to a village called The Chase to take charge of a Tulsi foodshop there.

His Christmas Present to His Daughter, An Act of Rebellion

Mr. Biswas's shop-keeping proves a disaster, and he is compelled to return to Hanuman House for protection and for his livelihood, despite the fact that his dislike of Hanuman House and his distaste for the inmates of that house have become even stronger than before. Mr. Biswas has by now become the father of three children, and there is no alternative for him but to return to Hanuman House. As life at Hanuman House has again become impossible, he is sent to Green Vale as an overseer at the Tulsi estate. During his stay at Green Vale, Mr. Biswas causes a tumult at Hanuman House by going there at Christmas time and giving to his daughter Savi a Christmas present in the shape of a doll's house. The convention at Hanuman House had been that all the children should be treated on par with one another, but Mr. Biswas has violated that convention by giving a present only to his daughter and giving nothing to the other children. Shama feels so harassed by the taunts of her sisters at Hanuman House that she breaks the doll's house into pieces, thus incurring Mr. Biswas's wrath. As a protest against Shama's action, Mr. Biswas takes Savi away to Green Vale to stay with him for a time. But Savi's stay with her father at Green Vale proves a complete failure. In the meantime, Mr. Biswas starts building a house of his own on the estate at Green Vale. This house is never completed, even though Mr. Biswas begins to live in one of the rooms in it. At Green Vale Mr. Biswas becomes mentally ill and has to be taken back to Hanuman House in a miserable condition. His house at Green Vale is subsequently set on fire by the labourers there. All that he has reaped from his rebelliousness so far is morbidity and mental sickness.

Relations with the Tulsis Never Harmonious

Returning to Hanuman House on account of his illness, he gradually recovers. But his relations with the Tulsis do not improve. He resents his children being given their names by the Tulsis without any reference to him. He has had verbal skirmishes with Shama about what he regards as her family's narrow ideas and her family's shabby

treatment of him. He has sharp exchanges even with Chinta. He often grumbles to Shama about his having been trapped by her family and about finding himself in a "hole". He always taunts Shama on Hari's house-blessing ceremonies. And he is always upset to see the swarm of unruly Tulsi grand-sons and grand-daughters.

A Slight Lessening of His Rebelliousness

Mr. Biswas now goes to Port of Spain and manage to obtain a job at the office of a newspaper called the *Trinidad Sentinel*, leaving his family behind at Hanuman House. For some time he has to stay with his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand. But once again he becomes dependent on the charity of Mrs. Tulsi when she offers him accommodation in a house which she had bought and where she has been staying with her son Owad. Mr. Biswas brings his family to Port of Spain and they all take up residence in Mrs. Tulsi's house. For a time Mr. Biswas's attitude to Mrs. Tulsi and Owad undergoes a change. Mr. Biswas becomes quite friendly with Owad, though his essential hostility to the Tulsi clan does not diminish much. Mr. Biswas finds life in Mrs. Tulsi's house miserable when a large number of her relations also come to stay there to bid farewell to Owad who is leaving for England. But, after Owad's return from England, Mr. Biswas has his most serious quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi, and this proves to be also the breaking point. He now departs from the Tulsi household for good.

The Rebellion Against a Communal Organization

Hanuman House, symbolically presided over by the monkey-god, is a communal organization whose maintenance depends on a recognition of the authority of the two leaders, and also on a denial of individuality to the subordinate members of the clan. As soon as the Tulsi leadership weakens, the whole system begins to disintegrate, and there follows the anarchy of the Shorthills adventure, where everybody pursues his or her own interest and where life seems to follow the code of the jungle where every creature is self-centred. In this decaying paradise of dictatorship, Mr. Biswas the individualist is described as a serpent and a spy. When he appears before Seth on one occasion, Seth complains that the Tulsi household has already become a republic. Seth's argument against Mr. Biswas is that the individual is worthless if he tries to live independently of the old system. The Tulsis remind Mr. Biswas again and again that he had come to them with no material possessions and that all the garments he owned at the time of his coming to them could be hung on a single nail. Tulsidom depends for its existence on the psychological undermining of the men and on the maintenance of their sense of inferiority. Every effort is made by the Tulsis to force Mr. Biswas to recognize his inferiority and admit a sense of subordination to them.

The Humiliation of Having to Live As subordinates in the Mother-in-Law's House

It is worth pointing out that the traditional Hindu custom requires the bride to join her husband's household and become almost a servant of her mother-in-law. The complete humiliation of the position of Mr. Biswas and of the other sons-in-law in the Tulsi household is that they have to live as servants, or at least as subordinates of their mother-in-law and uncle-in-law. Mr. Biswas's rebellion is directed against the humiliation. The rebellion in course of time becomes very vicious and bitter, and is accompanied with plenty of scorn and abuse. Indeed, Mr. Biswas at times behaves in a very petty, cowardly, and contemptible manner; and part of the novel's greatness lies in the fact that Naipaul has been able to present a hero in all his littleness and yet to preserve a sense of the man's inner dignity.

The Connection Between Rebellion and Independence

When Mr. Biswas is sent to The Chase, he faces life outside Hanuman House for the first time since his marriage, and he finds himself feeling afraid of the freedom which his rebellion has brought to him. He finds the shop at The Chase to be very lonely and very frightening. He feels afraid of disturbing the silence; he feels afraid of opening the door of the shop; he feels afraid of stepping into the light. Thus, we find that the novelist is trying to probe the relationship between rebellion and independence. What he wishes to convey to us is that true independence does not immediately follow rebellion: the achievement of one's true individuality does not immediately follow the attainment of freedom but must be constructed through a life-time of painful struggle. What follows freedom or emancipation is a dark void which a man must learn to face before he can step into the light. It takes Mr. Biswas all his life to fight the void; and whatever graciousness life has to offer to him comes very late, when he has almost lost the capacity to enjoy it. Mr. Biswas's victory in the long run lies in the fact that he has remained himself throughout and has preserved his basic integrity even though he becomes deeply influenced by an alien culture. There is no harm in acquiring the progressive features of an alien culture as long as a man remains true to himself.

Q. 2. Discuss *A House for Mr. Biswas* as "a novel which blends a sense of human growth with a feeling for its disintegration."

Or

How does Naipaul combine the themes of social and individual development and of family disintegration in *A House for Mr. Biswas*?

Write an account of the dissolution of the Tulsi family as depicted by Naipaul in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

"*A House for Mr. Biswas* depicts a classic struggle for personality against a society that denies it." Substantiate.

Or

Discuss *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a novel describing the protagonist's painful quest for identity.

The First Step in Mr. Biswas's Development As an Individual

A House for Mr. Biswas deals with two dominant themes. One is the theme of the development of the individual and of society; and the other is the theme of family disintegration or dissolution in the face of new forces and trends. Primarily this novel depicts Mr. Biswas's development as an individual and his quest for identity. After having failed in his efforts to establish himself either as an assistant to Pundit Jairam or as an assistant to Bhandat at the latter's rum-shop, Mr. Biswas finds himself married to Shama, a daughter of the Tulsi family living at Hanuman House. At Hanuman House Mr. Biswas finds that it would be necessary for him to lead a life of servility and of utter subordination to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. As a self-respecting and independent-minded man, he immediately rebels against the system which demands his unquestioning obedience. Hanuman House represents communal living, and a hierarchy with Mrs. Tulsi and Seth at the top, with Sushila and Padma coming next, followed by others. The Tulsi sons-in-law are mere cogs in the machinery of the organization of Hanuman House which is a symbol of traditionalism, conservatism, and the old Hindu culture with its emphasis on the joint family system according to which the head of the family is the principal authority. Mr. Biswas's rebellion against this system is the first step in the development of his personality.

His Growing Resentment Against the Tulsi Family

Mr. Biswas's refusal to conform to the code of conduct at Hanuman House leads to his expulsion from there. He is now sent to The Chase to take charge of the Tulsi food-shop there. He finds himself ill-equipped to function as a shopkeeper and to deal with his customers. Under pressure from Shama, he has to agree to hold a house-blessing ceremony to which he was otherwise opposed. The house-blessing ceremony necessitates a large expenditure which Mr. Biswas could hardly afford. Mr. Biswas also feels deeply dissatisfied with the accommodation which he is given at The Chase. Mrs. Tulsi describes this accommodation as "very nice little property", but Mr. Biswas makes sarcastic comments on this property and says that a coal-barrel would equally serve his purpose. Then Mr. Biswas also

protests against his first-born child being named by Seth and Hari who have not cared to consult him in the matter at all. He also resents his having been described as a "labourer" in the birth-certificate of this child. Subsequently, he even becomes unreasonable and protests against Savi being fed on fish by Mrs. Tulsi. And yet Mr. Biswas realizes at the same time that Hanuman House is a sanctuary to which he feels like going quite frequently. Thus his attitude towards Hanuman House now becomes ambivalent.

His Desire For Independence, Frustrated

At Green Vale Mr. Biswas cannot adjust himself to his life in the Tulsi barracks. As the conditions in the barracks are awful and intolerable, Mr. Biswas thinks it necessary to build a house of his own. He does not have enough money for the purpose, and yet, owing to his desire for independence and for living in a neat house, he embarks upon the project which leads only to a feeling of frustration because the house cannot be completed. Only one room in this house, of which Mr. Biswas is certainly the owner, is habitable; and Mr. Biswas moves into it. But he does not attain any peace of mind even after shifting into this house because he is now oppressed by a feeling of loneliness, by vague fears about his future, and by strange questionings. As a consequence he suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be carried to Hanuman House in order to be nursed back to health. The house built by Mr. Biswas at Green Vale is subsequently burned down by the labourers who had been hostile to him from the very beginning. Thus his desire for independence and for self-assertion comes to nothing.

His Short-Lived Independence at Shorthills

After recovering from his illness, Mr. Biswas feels that it would be impossible for him to stay on at Hanuman House as a dependant of Mrs. Tulsi. He leaves Hanuman House and goes to Port of Spain in order to explore "fresh woods and pastures new." But now he has to live in the house of his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand. Thus even now independence has eluded him. When he obtains a job as a newspaper-reporter, Mrs. Tulsi invites him to live in her house in Port of Spain on a nominal rent. Mr. Biswas sends for his family and shifts to Mrs. Tulsi's house. This again is a life of only partial independence. He does not feel very happy with his newspaper-job, especially after the old editor, Mr. Burnett, is sacked. Nor does he feel happy in Mrs. Tulsi's house. Then Mrs. Tulsi moves to her estate at Shorthills, and she invites Mr. Biswas to join her there with his family. For some time Mr. Biswas and his family live in Mrs. Tulsi's crowded house at Shorthills, but soon afterwards Mr. Biswas builds a house of his own on the Tulsi estate. After shifting into this house, he at last becomes independent and heaves a sigh of relief. But this independence is short-lived. His house catches fire partly on account of his own indiscretion and partly on account of accident, and is burned down.

Once again Mr. Biswas finds himself at Mrs. Tulsi's house, once again as a dependant.

Liberation At Last For Mr. Biswas

Mr. Biswas once again moves to Port of Spain with his family and gets a couple of rooms in the same house where he had been previously accommodated by Mrs. Tulsi. Since many other members of the Tulsi clan also now shift to this house in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas has no peace of mind. The conditions are insanitary, and the noise is awful. Then Owad returns from abroad and occupies the two rooms which Mr. Biswas had been occupying so that Mr. Biswas has to shift to another room in the same house. Under the strain and stress of living in this overcrowded and noisy house, Mr. Biswas quarrels with both Mrs. Tulsi and Owad. Mrs. Tulsi asks him to quit her house, and he declares that he regrets the day on which he had stepped into this house. He then buys a house of his own in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, though he has to borrow an amount of four thousand dollars from his uncle Ajodha in order to make up the full amount of five thousand and five hundred dollars demanded by the solicitor's clerk to whom the house belonged. The house is found subsequently to have many defects, but at last Mr. Biswas has become the owner of a house and has achieved the fulfilment of his long-cherished ambition. Mr. Biswas is now a fully developed person, both as regards his journalistic work and as a private individual. He has at last liberated himself from the stranglehold of Tulsidom.

Individual and Social Development (Or Growth)

But the novel does not depict the growth and development of Mr. Biswas only. Early in the novel Shekhar gets married to a Christian girl, thus breaking away from the conservatism of the Tulsi family. Even Mrs. Tulsi, who is the embodiment of Hindu orthodoxy, acquiesces in this marriage. After some time Govind becomes restive and feels discontented with his life at Hanuman House. After the family has moved to Shorthills, Govind stops working for Mrs. Tulsi and becomes a taxi-driver with an independent income of his own. Another son-in-law, nick-named W.C. Tuttle, also asserts his own independence and buys a house of his own, shifting to it and starting a new life. Then Govind also decides to buy a house of his own. Owad, who has come back from England as a completely westernized man, leaves his mother after some time and settles down in another town with a Christian wife, (Dorothy's cousin to whom he had got married). Thus the novel depicts the development and growth of the individuality of certain other persons in the novel also. At the same time the achievement of independence by these various persons is a symbol of social development in general. The old Hindu culture, having come into contact with an alien western culture, has to shed its old prejudices, customs, and barriers and adopt new ways of life. Not only do

W.C. Tuttle, Govind, and Owad establish themselves separately, but the other daughters of Tulsi and their husbands too move out of Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain, so that the Tulsi clan gets scattered. The joint Hindu family system has broken down in the face of new social trends and forces ; and this is a good sign.

The Crumbling Solidarity of the Tulsi Family

At the same time the novel makes us conscious of the fact that the Tulsi clan, which at the outset had been a compact and well-knit unit, disintegrates in course of time. The various members of the Tulsi clan certainly imbibe new ideas and adopt new modes of life. An outstanding example of this change, apart from Mr. Biswas, is W.C. Tuttle who is described as a blending of orthodoxy and modernity. W.C Tuttle declares that he is a firm upholder and defender of the old Brahminical culture; but at the same time he has fallen under the deep influence of western civilization and its literature, music, and art. A symbol of this man's modernity is his purchase of a four-foot high statue of a naked woman. But the advance made by Mr. Biswas and various other members of the Tulsi family means also a loss of certain precious traditional values. At Hanuman House every inmate recognized the authority of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. The system was working very well. There was perfect discipline in the house. During that period no inmate was allowed to assert his or her own individuality; but the family stood united. This family solidarity was a distinct advantage for each member of the family. Then came Mr Biswas who tried to upset the Tulsi apple-cart. His was the first voice of dissent; the first voice of rebellion against the prevalent system. Shekhar's getting married to a Christian girl and leaving Hanuman House to live with his wife's parents came as another blow to the family solidarity. The strict discipline of Hanuman House received yet another blow when Mrs. Tulsi went to live in Port of Spain to look after her younger son who was studying there. During her absence from Hanuman House, the accepted status of certain individuals lost its meaning. Sushila was reduced to a non-entity. Several other daughters of Mrs. Tulsi tried to seize power, any many squabbles ensued. Offended sisters began to look after their own families, sometimes even cooking separately for a day or two. Seth did receive the obedience of everyone; but even he failed to establish harmony among the quarrelling inmates. Seth's authority was eroded by Mrs. Tulsi's absence. And yet the family solidarity did not utterly collapse, as is evident from the fact that, when Mr. Biswas is reported to be gravely ill at Green Vale, Govind is sent to his rescue. Govind carries the ailing Mr. Biswas to Hanuman House. All members of the family then join in nursing Mr. Biswas back to health. Hanuman House has once agin proved to be a sanctuary and a shelter for Mr. Biswas. When Owad is leaving for England, all members of the Tulsi family, with the exception only of a few, gather to bid him farewell. A few,

who have not approved of Owad's going abroad because they are opposed to foreign travel on religious grounds, stay away from the farewell gathering.

Rivalries and Jealousies in the Tulsi Family

But the solidarity of the Tulsi family does not last very long. Govind, who had been so loyal to the family, now begins to feel discontented and to indulge in making adverse comments on the family. Mrs. Tulsi's influence is now on the wane and she is treated more or less as "a cantankerous invalid". In fact, she appears to have lost interest in the family. A rift then takes place between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, with the result that Seth begins to be resented by the others as an outsider. At Shorthills, the family finds itself in disarray. Here we find that every man looks after his own interest or the interest of his own wife and children. Govind now begins to assert himself too much. Indeed, he becomes a terror in the house, and he often insults Shama and her children. Not only that. W.C. Tuttle begins to cut down the cedar trees and to sell them for his own private benefit. Govind begins to do the same. One day, when some of the children kill a sheep and eat its meat, W.C. Tuttle declares that he would no longer eat from the common kitchen. W.C. Tuttle's wife begins to cook separately for her husband and her children. Some of the other women also set up their own separate kitchens. Even Mr. Biswas begins to steal oranges from the Tulsi trees and to sell them to add to his personal income. The sense of oneness of the family is thus completely lost. There is no fellow-feeling left and, instead of mutual sympathy, there is mutual rivalry and jealousy.

The Disintegration or Dissolution of the Tulsi Clan

Then they all shift to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Here the rivalries deepen. There is a rivalry between Govind and Chinta on one side and W.C. Tuttle and his wife on the other. W.C. Tuttle and Govind stop talking to each other because each has to park his vehicle in the same garage and each feels that the other is in his way. Then a rivalry begins between Mr. Biswas and W.C. Tuttle. Both try to excel each other in hanging pictures and photographs in their rooms. The widow Basdai starts her own enterprise, keeping boarders and lodgers to make some money for herself. Shekhar is still loved by his sisters but, as they are jealous of Dorothy, they do not feel as close to Shekhar as they used to do. Then Mr. Tuttle buys a house of his own and shifts to it. Mr. Biswas too sets up an independent establishment. Then the others too move out of Mrs. Tulsi's house in order to live separately. Owad's departure from his mother's house is the climax of this process of family disintegration. Now each family unit lives by itself and for itself. Some people may think it to be an advance, but the disadvantages of the loss of a sense of oneness and solidarity are obvious. The old order changes, yielding place to new. The joint family system cannot

last for ever, but it certainly had its advantages. The dissolution of the Tulsi family means also the weakening of those domestic emotions, attachments, and bonds which are so necessary for the mental and spiritual well-being of human society.

Q. 3. "Mr. Biswas's hatred of the Tulsi family is rooted in the perversity and weakness of his character." Do you agree? Give reasons in support of your answer.

Or

Analyze the reasons for Mr. Biswas's inveterate hatred of the Tulsi family.

Or

What evidence of unreasonableness and of an inadequacy in himself do you find in Mr. Biswas's attitudes to the Tulsi family in the course of this novel?

Or

Mr. Biswas has been accused of pettiness and cantankerousness* in his behaviour towards the Tulsi family. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

Or

Write a note on Mr. Biswas's temperamental aberrations and abnormalities which lead to his becoming an antagonist of the Tulsi family.

A Solid Basis For Mr. Biswas's Hatred of the Tulsi Family

Mr. Biswas's hatred of the Tulsi family is perhaps the most striking aspect of his character as portrayed in the novel. This hatred begins early in the novel and lasts till the very end. There is, no doubt, a strong basis for this hatred, and much can be said to justify him in his implacable attitude towards the Tulsi family. In the first place, he is hustled into a marriage which, on reflection, he might not have agreed to. Certain questions arise in his mind even before the marriage. What would happen to his mother after the marriage? Where would he live? He has no money or job because sign-writing, while good enough for a boy living with his mother, would hardly be a secure profession for a married man. To get a house he would first have to get a job. He needed much time, but the Tulsis give him none at all. He therefore assumes that the Tulsi family has decided to give him more than a dowry, and that they would in addition help him with a job or with a house or with both. In the event, he gets nothing at all from the Tulsi family, not even the money which they owed for the sign-writing work he

*Cantankerousness—quarrelsomeness; bad nature.

had done in their Store. Now, this is a strong ground for Mr. Biswas to rebel against the Tulsi family and to dislike it. When, as a married man, he begins to live in Hanuman House, he finds the conditions of life there intolerable. The organization of the Tulsi house is such that he is expected to live there as almost a dependant, and to conform to the Tulsi code. He is neither given a house nor a job. He therefore continues with his sign-painting work which he gets on a casual basis. His self-respect and his temperamental love of independence stand in the way of his leading a servile life in the Tulsi household. He finds that the other sons-in-law are passive and quiescent; but he simply cannot become another cog in the Tulsi home which he is expected to become. That is why he rebels. He leaves Hanuman House and seeks the help first of his mother and then of his aunt Tara. Both women visit Hanuman House, one after the other. Bipti comes back fully satisfied, while Tara is confronted with the love-note which had been written by Mr. Biswas to Shama and which is produced as evidence that it was a case of love-marriage and therefore not one in which any conditions about a job or a house had to be fulfilled. Mr. Biswas has then no alternative but to come back. The first thing which Shama asks him on his return to Hanuman House is if he has come back because he had felt tired of catching crabs in Pagotes (the village to which he had gone in order to meet Bipti and Tara). Mr. Biswas's reply is equally sarcastic. He says that he has come back in order to help the members of the Tulsi family to catch some crabs in this place. Nobody in the Tulsi household takes any notice of him when he has returned. The interest in his return is momentary and superficial. No one refers to his absence or return. He resumes his sign-writing, and spends as much time as he can out of the house. Thus Mr. Biswas has a solid reason for his resentment against the Tulsi family and his dislike for it. Another reason which later operates to add to his resentment is that, whenever Shama give birth to a child, the child is given a name chosen by Seth or by the family priest. Furthermore, when the first child is born, Mr. Biswas's occupation as specified by Seth for the purpose of the birth-certificate of Savi is one of a labourer instead of that of a shop-proprietor or a shopkeeper.

An Expression of His Hatred in Mere Tantrums

However, Mr. Biswas's revolt against the Tulsi family and his hatred of almost all its members take merely childish forms. His revolt has no direction to it, and no clear-cut purpose. His hatred finds an outlet in his tantrums. He begins constantly to scold Shama and to taunt her with regard to the various members of the family. For instance, on one occasion, in the course of his eating a meal, he refers to Shama's two brothers as "the little gods." He then goes on to refer mockingly to Seth as "the big boss" and to Mrs. Tulsi as "the old queen", "the old hen", and "the old cow". When Shama, feeling hurt, says that nobody had specifically asked him to

get married into her family, his reply is again a taunt. "Family? Family? This blasted fowl-run you calling family?" he says. And then he goes on to say that he is hoping to spit on some members of her family. Now, this is all childish talk. Mr. Biswas is certainly a witty man, but the exercise of his wit in the manner indicated above does not do much credit to him.

Mr. Biswas's Rage, An Example of His Perversity

Mr. Biswas's next move is to try to form an alliance with Govind to whom he describes the members of the Tulsi family as "blood-suckers", and to whom he says that he believes in "paddling his own canoe". As Govind conveys everything to Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Biswas is taken to task for having spoken in an insulting manner about the Tulsi family and is asked to apologize. Mr. Biswas thereupon loses his temper and says: "The whole pack of you could go to hell! I not going to apologize to one of the damn lot of you," he says. Everybody is astounded to hear this reply from Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas then starts packing the few belongings which he has in order to quit Hanuman House, but is persuaded to stay on by Chinta. This incident again shows the element of unreasonableness and even perversity in Mr. Biswas's nature. He had certainly done a wrong to the Tulsi family by having abused them in Govind's presence and, if Govind has conveyed the whole thing to the heads of the family, Mr. Biswas should have gracefully expressed his regret over the unfortunate words that he had used about them. But, instead of expressing any regret, he loses his temper and threatens to quit Hanuman House as if some other place were waiting eagerly to receive him.

A Malcontent, Poking Fun At the Tulsi Family

Mr. Biswas is not resourceful enough to think of some method by which he can establish himself independently. He knows well that he cannot get a job anywhere. His sign-painting does not bring him enough money. He cannot maintain his family with this income. But this economic pressure, instead of goading him to some initiative by which he can gain a foothold somewhere else, compels him to stay on in Hanuman House. He finds himself in the strange situation of a keenly dissatisfied man feeling compelled by circumstances to continue with this kind of existence. The result is that he becomes a malcontent, and he continues to give expression to his dislike of the Tulsi family in sarcastic remarks and begins even to attack the religious views of the family and the rituals which they perform. Having come into contact with a man called Misir and another man who is an Aryan missionary, he adopts the progressive views of Arya Samaj and begins to make fun of the orthodoxy of the Tulsi family. He tells Shama that, in the opinion of the Aryan missionary, a man like Seth should be made a cowherd and that Shama's two brothers should be made either road-sweepers or washer-boys or barbers. He then also says that Shama's mother

(meaning Mrs. Tulsi) is by no means a Hindu because she has married off her favourite daughter in a registry office in order to save money on a traditional Hindu marriage. Mr. Biswas also makes fun of Shama's brothers for attending a Roman Catholic College and wearing crucifixes, when otherwise they profess the Hindu religion and perform Hindu rituals.

Childish Criticism By a Helpless Man

Mr. Biswas's campaign of hatred against the Tulsi family does not end here. He misses no opportunity of condemning the leading members of the Tulsi family, though he refrains from condemning them in their presence. He tells Shama what he thinks of the leading members of the family and Shama, who is naturally loyal to her family, reports everything to her mother. Speaking to Shama on one occasion, Mr. Biswas describes her two brothers as monkeys. He says that Hanuman House has the statue of a monkey (namely Hanuman) on its outside, and that it has two living monkeys inside. Then he says that there are monkeys in the house, that there is a bull (meaning Seth), and that there is a cow (meaning Mrs. Tulsi) in the house, and that for this reason Hanuman House is a "blasted zoo". This again is the childish talk of an impotent man who is devoid of any enterprising spirit and who, being unable to build himself up by taking some bold step in life, gives expression to his venom in sarcastic comments. Rightly does Shama say to him on this occasion that he is "the barking puppy dog" in this zoo. Mr. Biswas, accepting Shama's description of him, says that a dog is man's best friend; and, feeling satisfied with what he has said, he begins to swing his calves as is his habit. By this kind of talk, it must be admitted, Mr. Biswas shows himself to be an absurd man. Rightly does the Tulsi family regard him as a buffoon and a trouble-maker.

A Petty-Minded, Cantankerous Man

His campaign of hatred continues to follow the same pattern, thus reinforcing our impression that Mr. Biswas is a petty-minded, cantankerous man who tries to cover up his own inadequacies by making bitter and sarcastic comments on the Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas even shows a vindictive streak in his nature. He joins an association which decides that the views of Arya Samaj should be propagated by peaceful persuasion if possible, and through violence if necessary. This decision is published in a newspaper with Mr. Biswas's name as one of the members of the association. The Tulsi family feels greatly upset to find its orthodoxy challenged publicly by an inmate of its own house. Seth asks Mr. Biswas if he is bent upon disgracing the family but Mr. Biswas's reply is that everybody in this family is jealous of him. Mrs. Tulsi rightly asks Mr. Biswas what he has got in him for others to be jealous of. Shekhar begins to scold his mother for tolerating Mr. Biswas in the house and even

feeding him at her own cost. The altercation continues but Mr. Biswas, instead of feeling dejected by the unpleasant episode, feels exhilarated. He even feels that in his campaign against the Tulsis he is winning.

His going Out of His Way to Attack the Religious Beliefs of the Tulsis

Mr. Biswas's next step is to start Christian propaganda in the Tulsi household on the basis of the booklets which he has received from a certain Miss Weir; and he refers to Shekhar's crucifix as evidence that the family is already well on the way to become Roman Catholics. This line of attack proves too much for Mrs. Tulsi who faints. Next morning, however, he goes to Mrs. Tulsi and inquires about her health, thereby making a gesture of appeasement. But, moments later, speaking to Shama privately, he says that Mrs. Tulsi is not an old hen or an old cow but a "she-fox." Then a little later when Owad goes to Mr. Biswas carrying the holy tray with a piece of burning camphor on it, Mr. Biswas bluntly says that he does not believe in this kind of idol-worship. Thus Mr. Biswas goes out of his way to attack the religious beliefs of the Tulsi family. It is true that the Tulsi family is already making compromises between its orthodoxy and the alien western culture, and is coming under the influence of that alien culture; but that does not mean that Mr. Biswas should go out of his way to point out the contradictions in the attitudes of the Tulsi family. His attacks on the Tulsi family are prompted not by any missionary zeal but simply by his hatred for the family. Besides, it is noteworthy that, although he does experience a sense of exhilaration after having made such attacks, he is also overtaken by fits of depression. Here is another weakness of character in him. There is an element of morbidity in his nature and this morbidity causes such fits of depression. The morbidity is increased by his inaction, and his inaction is due to the fact that he has no capacity for taking initiatives.

Other Examples of Mr. Biswas's Perversity

On one occasion, when Shama brings him food on a brass plate, he reminds her that he has repeatedly told her of his dislike of brass plates which he regards as unhygienic. Then, seeing rice and potatoes in the plate, he says that he does not want to eat "all that damn starch". Rightly does Shama retort that he would be justified in complaining about the food only when he is able to buy the food with his own money. Then, without any provocation, he gargles and spits out the water out of the window, letting it fall upon the head of Owad who is standing below. When Owad threatens to report the matter to his mother, Mr. Biswas is not in the least perturbed. Moments later he throws a plateful of food upon Owad's head, thus aggravating the situation. This behaviour is again a result of the hatred which he feels for various members of

Tulsi family, a hatred which by now has become chronic and deep-rooted. This time, however, Mr. Biswas does not go scot-free. He gets a thrashing from Govind, and we feel that the thrashing is well deserved by Mr. Biswas. On the following day Seth informs Mr. Biswas that it has been decided to send him to The Chase to take charge of the Tulsi food-shop there. Mr. Biswas's perversity and his temperamental abnormality have been responsible for his expulsion from Hanuman House. However, the expulsion also means Mr. Biswas's liberation from the stranglehold of Hanuman House.

His Continuing Hatred, Most Unreasonable

The change of scene certainly means a lessening of tension for Mr. Biswas. But the relief is short-lived. Mr. Biswas makes a mess* of the food-shop. And the result is that all his hatred of the Tulsi family revives. Now, the Tulsis did not send Mr. Biswas to The Chase in order that he should prove a failure and should then go back to them. There is no evidence at all in the novel that the Tulsis had any wicked design in sending him to The Chase. The plain fact is that Mr. Biswas is an incompetent man. Not only does the shop make no profit; but Mr. Biswas is duped by a lawyer's tout and as a result gets involved in a legal wrangle with one of his customers. After six years' stay at The Chase, Mr. Biswas finds himself in debt. During all this time he has been complaining to Shama against the Tulsi family. It is during this period that Shama gives birth to three children one after the other; and all of them are given their names by the Tulsi family. It is during this period that, as an act of vindictiveness against the Tulsi family, Mr. Biswas gets a news-item published in the newspaper to discredit the Tulsi family. According to this news-item, the Tulsi family has been rearing pigs on their estate, something which no orthodox Hindu would do. Here is another example of the perversity of Mr. Biswas. On one occasion when Savi, his eldest child, complains that she is being made to eat fish by her grandmother (Mrs. Tulsi), Mr. Biswas tells her to throw away the fish whenever her grandmother offers it to her. He also tells Shama to stop Mrs. Tulsi from feeding his daughter with all sorts of bad food. Here Mr. Biswas's unreasonable attitude is most glaring. Everybody knows that fish is a very nourishing food, but Mr. Biswas must criticize every action of Mrs. Tulsi's.

Hatred, Combined with Appreciation : A Paradox

The paradox about Mr. Biswas is that, while he has become a strong critic of the Tulsi family, he yet realizes the value of Hanuman House. During the years of his stay at The Chase, he realizes that Hanuman House can serve as a sanctuary for him and for his family. Hanuman House becomes to him what Tara's house had been when he was a boy. He realizes that he can go to Hanuman

*Makes a mess of—ruins; spoils.

House whenever he wishes and become lost in the crowd. So he begins to pay frequent visits to Hanuman House, not talking much but trying to win the favour of everybody. This realization certainly dilutes his hatred for the Tulsi family, but does not nullify it. In fact, the hatred revives in its full intensity on various subsequent occasions. Instead of being a permanent and fixed feeling in his heart, this hatred now becomes a recurrent passion. During the entire six-year stay at The Chase, the relations between Mr. Biswas and his wife remain cool. We should have expected a certain intimacy and a certain mutual understanding to grow between them; but they continue to be strangers to each other mainly because Mr. Biswas hates her family while she defends her family.

His Perverse Reactions to the Tulsi Family, Continuing

At Green Vale Mr. Biswas's circumstances take a turn for the worse. His new duties prove even more irksome to him. The labourers on the estate try to befool him. For the annoyance thus caused to him, he again blames the Tulsi family and picks up quarrels with Shama who, as a consequence, begins to spend short or long periods at Hanuman House instead of keeping him company at the barracks in Green Vale. Mr. Biswas tries to compensate himself for his misfortunes by building a house of his own, but the house remains incomplete on account of a shortage of funds. Although he moves into his new house, which has remained incomplete, no improvement takes place in his state of mind. He constantly feels that he was "trapped" by the Tulsi family and that, furthermore, it is the Tulsi family which has been responsible for putting him in this "hole". He has another tiff with the Tulsi family when he takes a gift in the form of a doll's house for his daughter Savi at Christmas while giving nothing to the other children. Mrs. Tulsi believes in treating all the children in the household on a uniform basis, while Mr. Biswas has treated his daughter Savi on a preferential basis. This becomes another issue between him and Mrs. Tulsi, and also between him and Shama who, harassed by her sisters, shatters the doll's house into pieces and throws it on a heap of rubbish. Mr. Biswas now begins to be haunted by the "amazing scenes" of the headline of a newspaper. He also begins to be haunted by strange fears about his future; and he is tormented by all kinds of questionings. Neither Savi's stay with him nor Anand's brings him much relief. He keeps muttering to himself that he has been trapped in a hole. Thus his simmering resentment against the Tulsi family becomes an obsession with him and then leads to his nervous breakdown. Now, who is responsible for this whole situation? The Tulsi family is doing no damage to him at all, but his grudge against the Tulsi family has not abated. Inwardly, even more than outwardly, he puts the whole responsibility for his failures and inadequacies on the Tulsi family. On one occasion, he feels like throwing the cup of tea, which Shama has handed to him, at her face. This is nothing but perversity on his part. When Seth comes and informs him that he has settled the

police case against Mr. Biswas for having violated the traffic rules, Mr. Biswas does not even say "thanks" to him. When Shama on one occasion comes back from Hanuman House to stay with him, he perversely asks her why she had not continued living at Hanuman House. When she weeps and sobs, he speaks not a single word of sympathy, even though she has explained to him the circumstances under which she had broken the doll's house. On the contrary, he ironically promises to buy her a gold brooch. His reaction to her fourth pregnancy also shows his perverse nature. On learning about this pregnancy, he meditates thus : "One child claimed ; one still hostile ; one unknown. And now another." And, next, Mr. Biswas begins to fall into "the void" ; with the terror which has overtaken him he lies awake at nights. In short, the weakness in his own character is largely responsible for his misery. He cannot come to terms with reality. He cannot fight against the hostility of circumstance. He cannot come to an adjustment with the Tulsi family; he is lacking in the needful resilience for the purpose; he is rigid in his obduracy. If his house remains incomplete, the Tulsi family is not at all to blame for it. But he shows his unreasonableness in attributing all his misfortunes and disappointments to the initial fact that he had been trapped into marrying Shama.

No Gratitude and No Spirit of Compromise in Him

When he suffers a nervous breakdown at Green Vale, he is carried to Hanuman House by Govind. There he is nursed back to health. Once again Hanuman House has proved to be a refuge for him, a sanctuary. But even now he hardly feels grateful to the Tulsi family though he does realize the service which the family has done to him during his illness. On recovering, he slips out of the house and goes away to Port of Spain without informing anybody and without even having seen the fourth child to whom Shama has given birth. In Port of Spain he again reaps disappointment and failure in several ways, even though his son Anand's winning a scholarship in course of time brings great joy to him and even though his second job, as a Community Welfare Officer, promises a bright future to him. The Tulsi family comes again to his rescue by offering him accommodation in their house in Port of Spain. As a consequence he is able to bring Shama and the children to Port of Spain to live with him. Subsequently, the Tulsi family invites him to join them on their estate at Shorthills. At Shorthills he gets another opportunity to build a house of his own. This time he is able to complete his house, thus attaining the fulfilment of his long-cherished ambition. But, as ill luck would have it, his house is burned down by an accidental fire and he has to go back into Mrs. Tulsi's house at Shorthills and then once more to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. And yet Mr. Biswas feels no gratitude at all towards the Tulsi family. In fact, during his stay at Shorthills he has been stealthily plucking oranges from the Tulsi trees and selling them. For Personal Digital Preservation Project, Chandigarh

the other Tulsi sons-in-law have been cutting down cedar trees to sell them for private profit. In Port of Spain Mr. Biswas can find no other accommodation even though he is feeling miserable in Mrs. Tulsi's house on account of the overcrowding. After Owad's return from abroad, conditions in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain become intolerable to Mr. Biswas who goes out of his way to pick up a quarrel with Owad and Mrs. Tulsi and has, as a consequence, to quit Mrs. Tulsi's house. This quarrel and the breach which results from it are also due to Mr. Biswas's own temperamental aberration. Of course, the Tulsi family is far from perfect; Mrs. Tulsi's attitude has always been partronizing; Owad's manner after his return from England is also that of a man having a superiority complex. But Mr. Biswas too shows no spirit of compromise. His independent-mindedness becomes a fetish with him, and his instinct of rebellion gets the better of his discretion. While we certainly admire him for his guts, for his dislike of tyranny, and for his self-respect, we cannot completely ignore his own weaknesses and the touch of perversity in his nature which keep his hatred for the Tulsi family alive.

Q. 4. Identify the main elements of comedy in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

Naipaul has expressed the view that *A House for Mr. Biswas* contains some of his funniest writing. Substantiate this view.

Or

Write a note on the humorous and comic elements in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

Bring out the quality of wit and humour as revealed in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

Illustrate Naipul's talent for humorous characterization from his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Three Main Sources of Comedy

Naipaul has himself said that *A House for Mr. Biswas* contains some of his funniest writing, and he is right. There is an abundance of comedy in this novel despite an undercurrent of seriousness and gravity throughout the narration. There is much to tickle us and to amuse us even though at times our hearts are touched by the poignancy of event and occurrence. Three principal sources of comedy in this novel may be identified. Firstly, there is the comedy in the portrayal of characters, showing Naipaul's talent for humorous characterization. Then there is the comedy of situation. And,

thirdly, there is the comedy arising from the exercise of wit and the capacity for sarcastic statement displayed by various characters.

Comedy in the Portrayal of Characters : Ghany ; Lal ; Alec ; Jairam

The portrayal of almost all the characters in this novel is comic to a greater or a lesser extent. Even Mr. Biswas, who is more or less tragically presented at various points in the course of the novel, has his comic aspects. The various characters whom we meet early in the novel are, almost all of them, comic. Tara, who is on the whole an admirable woman because of her organizing ability, amuses us by being heavily bejewelled. Her arms are encased from wrist to elbow with silver bangles which she had often recommended to her sister Bipti with the remark that, even though the bangles were not very pretty, one blow from her arm with the bangles around it would be enough to defeat any attacker. The manner in which Ghany, the solicitor and oath commissioner, is described in the midst of his dusty books, is also amusing. The teacher Lal, a low-caste Hindu converted to Christianity, is an amusing person too. This man has sound educational principles and does not believe in sparing the rod and spoiling the child. On finding the boy Alec dressed in a bodice given to him by his sister-in-law, Lal directs the boy to inform his sister-in-law that ought twos do not make four as the boy has said but that ought twos are ought. Alec the boy amuses us by his pranks. Not only does he become a conspicuous figure in the school by virtue of the colourful bodices which he wears instead of the usual ordinary shirts, but one day he startles the whole school by peeing blue on account of the medicinal pills which he had swallowed. Pundit Jairam amuses us by the contradictions in his character. Although he himself believes fervently in God, he declares that it is strictly not necessary for a Hindu to believe in God. Then, while he himself is a vegetarian, he declares that there is nothing wrong with eating meat because even Lord Rama was a meat-eater. The manner in which he forces Mr. Biswas to eat a large number of bananas as a punishment for Mr. Biswas's theft of two bananas is also an amusing episode.

Humorous Characterization : Mrs. Tulsi

Mrs. Tulsi too appears as a comic character in the novel despite all the authority she wields at Hanuman House and despite the awe in which she is held by the various inmates. The author's description of her fainting fits and the alarm they cause is one of the most amusing ones in the book. Mrs. Tulsi, we are told, fainted often. Whenever she faints, a complex ritual is gone through. One daughter immediately goes to get the Rose Room ready. The other daughters take Mrs. Tulsi to that room, with Padma and Sushila supervising all the arrangements. In the Rose Room one daughter fans Mrs. Tulsi; two daughters massage her legs; yet another pours bay rum into her loosened hair and massages her forehead.

The remaining daughters stand by, ready to carry out the instructions of Padma or Sushila. The little gods (that is, the two Tulsi sons) are also often there, looking solemnly on what is happening. All other activity in the house is suspended; in fact, the house becomes dead. The description of the various medicinal bottles, ointments, and pills which lie in Mrs. Tulsi's room is also quite amusing. Then there is the amusing hint that these fainting fits are not genuine. Mrs. Tulsi fakes these fainting fits in order to draw attention to the fact that she is easily upset by anything which is said or done to offend her. Generally, one of her sons-in-law is responsible for bringing about a fainting fit. Thus these fainting fits are a matter of strategy on Mrs. Tulsi's part.

Humorous Characterization: Govind; Hari ; W.C. Tuttle, Etc.

The various sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi are also portrayed as comic figures. Govind assaults his food as if he were anxious to prove that hard work in the Tulsi fields had given him an enormous appetite. His manner of eating is funny. He eats his meals in a savage, noisy way, with rice and curry spilled all over his hairy hand and trickling down to his wrist. Later in the novel we feel amused to learn that Govind has given up doing field work and, having become a taxi-driver, has started wearing western clothes. He also now starts beating his wife Chinta, who, however, does not protest against these beatings because she thinks that these beatings add to her dignity and make her appear as a kind of matriarch in the house. Not only are both Govind and Chinta comic figures, but their son Vidiadhar too amuses us greatly. Vidiadhar declares that he is sure to win a scholarship as a result of the exhibition examination which he has taken but, in the event, he is declared as having failed in the examination. Hari too is a comic figure. This man spends much time in the toilet, and this habit of his makes him feared by the other inmates who wait impatiently for him to come out. Hari is a sick man, and his wife speaks with sorrow and pride of the terrifying diagnoses of various doctors. We feel amused also by the manner in which he officiates as a priest at the religious functions held by the family. He feels most at home when he changes from his field clothes into his pundit's garb. W.C. Tuttle amuses us by his obsession with his gramophone, and even more by his habit of playing one single record again and again. Then there are Bhandat and his sons, all of whom are comic figures. Bhandat, though a married man with two sons, is keeping a mistress whom he visits every weekend. After the death of his wife, Bhandat leaves the village for good and goes to live in Port of Spain with his mistress who is a Chinese woman. The account of Mr. Biswas's visit to Bhandat and his Chinese mistress in the slum area where they are living in poverty and wretchedness is half pathetic and half comic. Bhandat's two sons have begotten several illegitimate sons because they have not got married at all but have been having keeping mistresses. The several daughters of Mrs. Biswas amuse us greatly by their criticism

of Dorothy. Actually Shama's sisters are jealous of Dorothy, and they give vent to their feelings by criticizing this Christian girl to whom their brother Shekhar had got married. They accuse Dorothy of using her right hand for unclean purposes; they allege that Dorothy's sexual appetite is enormous; they say that Dorothy's daughters already have the eyes of whores. All this criticism is nullified by Dorothy's attitude and behaviour. Here the comedy is almost uproarious. We have similar uproarious comedy in the author's description of the behaviour of the scholars and learners at the house in Port of Spain, and also in the author's description of the behaviour of the widows who devise several methods of earning money but who do not achieve much success.

Humorous Characterization : Mr. Biswas and Shama

The bad omens accompanying the birth of Mr. Biswas and the gloomy predictions which are made about the boy's future are all very amusing. Mr. Biswas amuses us also by his habit of swinging his calves. We are greatly amused when, on one occasion in later years, he puts on one of his new suits and rides his bicycle, with a tin of cigarettes and a match-box in one hand, to the cricket ground to witness an inter-colonial cricket match. Mr. Biswas does this only to keep up with the prevailing fashion. Then there are other amusing incidents involving Mr. Biswas. He is duped by a lawyer's tout at The Chase, and he is duped again by a solicitor's clerk from whom he buys the house in Sikkim Street. Shama's habit of sitting with her legs apart is also amusing. The son of Mr. Biswas and Shama too appears as a comic figure on certain occasions. For instance, their son, whose name is Anand, first adopts all Owad's views to which Owad gives expression on his return from abroad; then the boy rejects those views because Owad has snubbed him; then once again he adopts those views because he is reconciled to Owad; and then once again he discards those views when Mr. Biswas has finally quarrelled with Owad and Mrs. Tulsi and is ready to quit their house.

The Comedy of Situations

There are a large number of situations in the course of the novel which are funny. The manner of Raghu's death, in itself a tragic event, amuses us by the irony of the situation. Raghu is drowned in the village pond while trying to rescue his son who is actually safe and sound and who is hiding under his father's bed at home. Mr. Biswas's action in gargling and spitting out the water over Owad's head and then throwing a plateful of food over the head of the "little god" are certainly amusing situations, though even more amusing is the punishment which Mr. Biswas receives when Govind, taking the side of Owad, begins to shower blows on Mr. Biswas's head. The manner in which Seth gets Mr. Biswas's shop at The Chase insured and then burned

down in order to claim compensation from the insurance company is another amusing situation. The manner in which the various mothers in Hanuman House and subsequently in the house in Port of Spain flog their children, and their motives in flogging them, are also part of the comedy in the novel. Sometimes a child is flogged because its mother wishes to give vent to her resentment against some other member of the family, most often Mr. Biswas. Then, it is amusing to read the account of the manner in which the children have to travel from Shorthills to Port of Spain in order to attend their schools. Sometimes the car, by which they are being transported, breaks down on the way, and the children have to push it. One of the most amusing situations is Mr. Biswas's taking his son Anand to the cinema and then discovering that he does not have enough money for the two full tickets which are required instead of the one and a half tickets which he had thought would be required. The son returns home without seeing the film, and then the father, who had entered the cinema hall with a ticket, also comes back without seeing the film. Of course, there is a touch of pathos too in this situation. The wheels of Mr. Biswas's car sinking into the sand where Mr. Biswas had parked the vehicle, and the difficulty which he and the members of his family have in dragging the vehicle out of the sand is another comic episode. The account of the seven marriages which take place simultaneously one night at Shorthills is another funny situation. "The seven bridegrooms came in seven cavalcades with seven teams of drummers," we are told. The manner in which Govind and W.C. Tuttle cut down the trees on the Tulsi estate at Shorthills for personal profit is again funny. The two men give various reasons for cutting down the trees, but their actual reason is to make money from the sale of the wood thus obtained. Even more amusing is Mr. Biswas's action in habitually plucking oranges stealthily from the Tulsi trees, putting them into his bag, and then riding his bicycle to Port of Spain where he sells those oranges to a shopkeeper, saying that he has a number of oranges trees growing in the backyard of his house. Another amusing episode is the rivalry between Govind-Chinta and the Tuttles. The Tuttles keep playing a gramophone record which disturbs the others with its noise. To counter this noise, Govind and Chinta begin to recite songs from the Ramayana in loud voices. The rivalry between Mr. Biswas and W.C. Tuttle is also amusing. At first it is a rivalry pertaining to their collections of books; then they both begin to display pictures and photographs on the walls of their rooms, trying to excel each other. Some of the adventures of Mr. Biswas in the course of his investigation of deserving destitutes are also funny. On one occasion a prostitute demands her fee from him on the ground that he has slept with her, while in actual fact he had merely been questioning her with regard to her financial difficulties.

Wit and Sarcasm : Seth; Ajodha

Some of the characters in the novel have a fertile wit and a talent for making sarcastic remarks which amuse us greatly. Of

course, the wittiest character in the novel is Mr. Biswas himself; but there are others too possessing this quality. One of them is Seth who, despite the position of authority which he holds in the house, can enjoy a laugh at the cost of others. When, for instance, Seth learns from Govind what Mr. Biswas has been saying against the Tulsi family, Seth does not lose his temper. He summons Mr. Biswas but, instead of rebuking and reprimanding him, begins to ridicule him. "You want to paddle your own canoe," says Seth to Mr. Biswas, adding: "Look at him! Biswas the paddler." And everybody present there begins to laugh. Seth then goes on to ridicule Mr. Biswas with reference to Mr. Biswas's father. Seth says that Mr. Biswas's father was a great diver but that the diving capacity of Mr. Biswas's father had failed to take Mr. Biswas anywhere. Some time later, Seth ridicules Mr. Biswas's zeal for the views preached by an Aryan missionary by poking fun at that missionary. Seth says that these Aryan missionaries are lecherous and try to seduce any woman with whom they come in contact. "They want to lift the woman up to get on top of them," says Seth with reference to the Aryan missionaries, and Seth then goes on to illustrate his point with reference to the particular missionary by the name of Pankaj Rai who had been turned out by his host from his house because the missionary had tried to seduce his host's daughter-in-law. Seth says that he would not trust even his great grandmother with an Aryan. Ajodha too is capable of making sarcastic remarks. When Ajodha learns that Mr. Biswas has got married, he begins to laugh, saying: "Married man! Married man!" Ajodha then calls out to his wife, saying: "Tara, Tara. Come and look at your married nephew." Ajodha also makes fun of Mr. Biswas for having written a love-note to Shama. Ajodha shrieks with a malicious delight saying: "Love letter! Mohun!" Much later in the novel Ajodha makes fun of Mr. Biswas for having bought a car which is a very light vehicle. He describes the car as "cardboard" and he warns Mr. Biswas to be careful lest the car should be blown off the road by the breeze Govind also ridicules this car by calling it a matchbox.

Wit and Sarcasm : Mr. Biswas and Shama

As already indicated, Mr. Biswas is the wittiest character in the novel. He has something witty to say in every situation. Barring the circumstances which lead to his nervous breakdown at Green Vale, Mr. Biswas has something witty and amusing to say even in the most distressing situation. As he is generally in depressing circumstances, his wit takes a bitter and cynical form. Mr. Biswas's sarcastic comments on various members of the Tulsi family at the outset of his career as a Tulsi son-in law are very amusing indeed. He refers to the two Tulsi sons as the "little gods". He describes Mrs. Tulsi as the "old hen" and as the "old cow", subsequently modifying his description and referring to her as a "she-fox". When Shama says that nobody had forced him to marry into the Tulsi family, his retort is that it is not a family but a "fowl-run". Then

he describes Hanuman House as a zoo, and refers to Shama's two brothers as monkeys. Shama shows her capacity for sarcasm by saying that in this zoo Mr. Biswas is a "barking puppy dog". After a visit to the Aryan missionary one day, Mr. Biswas tells Shama that the Aryan missionary would regard the members of her family as barbarians. The Aryan missionary would make Seth a cow-herd, adding that as a cow-herd Seth would also have to skin dead animals in order to obtain leather from their skin. The Aryan missionary would make Shama's two brothers road-sweepers or, perhaps, washer-boys or, more probably, barbers. When at The Chase Mrs. Tulsi describes the room and the shop as "nice little property" for Mr. Biswas, he makes several sarcastic comments on the property as well as on Mrs. Tulsi. Later he taunts Shama on Myna's picking lice from her granny's hair. When the shop at The Chase shows losses, Mr. Biswas asks Shama if Hari can be invited to come and unbless the shop so that the shop may make some profit. When Owad is about to be sent to England and Shama expresses her doubts as to the kind of food he would get in that country, Mr. Biswas remarks sarcastically that every morning in England the scavengers go around picking up the corpses because the food there is not cooked by orthodox Roman Catholic Hindus. At Shorthills, Mr. Biswas tells Shama that he cannot understand the madness which has overtaken her family who have left Arwacas to settle at this far-off place. Seeing many bamboo trees on the estate, he mockingly says to Mrs. Tulsi: "A lot of bamboo. You can start a paper factory". Seeing a mule on the estate, Mr. Biswas mockingly says: "Horses". This he says with reference to Mrs. Tulsi's declaration that there were horses on the estate and that the children would learn to ride upon those horses. Actually there is no sign of horses here. Similarly he mockingly asks where are the swimming pool and the cricket field which Mrs. Tulsi had talked about to lure the family to Shorthills. Subsequently, when a fire has destroyed Mr. Biswas's house, he ironically says that, if anybody wants charcoal, plenty of it is available at his charred house, adding that the ashes from the burnt house can be collected and used as a kind of fertilizer. On one occasion, after the Tuttles have bought a house of their own, Mr. Biswas sarcastically says that with ten fat Tuttles skipping around in that house, the house is sure to need repairs soon. Shama adds to the comedy in the novel by her taunting remarks. She mocks at Mr. Biswas, saying that when he had first come to Hanuman House to live there he did not have more clothes than could be hung on a single nail. When he complains about the food he is getting at Hanuman House, she ridicules him by saying that it is the first time in his life that he is eating three square meals a day. His retort is that the biggest item of food and drink for him in this house is soda-bicarb which he has to take to aid his digestion. On another occasion she makes fun of him by saying that nobody in the Tulsi family has calves swinging like hammocks as he has.

Q. 5. Write a critical note on the structure of *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

Discusses the merits and shortcomings of *A House for Mr. Biswas* from the point of view of its structure.

Or

In what light does Naipaul appear to you as a craftsman in his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* ?

Or

Do you think that *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a well-constructed novel ? Give reasons for your answer.

Or

Discuss Naipaul's narrative technique in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Written in the Picaresque Mode. Much Superfluous Matter

A House for Mr. Biswas cannot boast of that unity of action and that well-knit structure which we expect from a great work of art. This novel does not have a compact structure, and the plot cannot be said to be well-constructed. No doubt, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a great novel and, perhaps, the best which Naipaul has so far written, but its greatness is due not to its structure which is rather loose and episodic. This novel is written in the picaresque mode. (A picaresque novel is one which contains the account of a series of adventures gone through by a rogue but which may also be defined as the account of the adventures of a lively and resourceful hero in the course of a journey). Even if we accept the use of the picaresque technique as being legitimate and valid in this novel, we cannot escape the feeling that the novel contains much superfluous matter and that it could have structurally improved with some pruning. The use of the label "picaresque" for *A House for Mr. Biswas* would seem amply justified if we take a look at the headings of the various chapters. Each chapter marks a certain stage in the course of Mr. Biswas's journey through life. These stages in the first part of the novel are : "Pastoral" ; "Before the Tulsis" ; "The Tulsis" ; "The Chase" ; "Green Vale" ; and "A Departure". The different stages of Mr. Biswas's journey in the second part of the novel are : "Amazing Scenes" ; "The New Regime" ; "The Shorthill Adventure" ; "Among the Readers and Learners" ; "The Void" ; "The Revolution" ; and "The House". Now all these stages are undoubtedly important in giving us an idea of the ordeals and the vicissitudes through which Mr. Biswas passes in the course of his life.

The Inappropriateness of the Prologue and the Epilogue

Before we come to the main body of the novel, a word may be said about the Prologue and the Epilogue. The Prologue informs us about the death of Mr. Biswas in the very opening sentence. As Mr. Biswas is mentioned in the title of the novel, we can guess from this opening sentence that it is the death of the chief protagonist that is being referred to. Then follow certain facts and circumstances which we shall subsequently find developed in the course of the narration of the story of Mr. Biswas. Now, we naturally wonder what the author's purpose in writing this Prologue was. To be informed about some of the vital facts about the life of the chief protagonist at the very outset completely destroys that mood of expectancy which normally the reader experiences while passing from one chapter to the next. The mood of expectancy and the suspense which the narration of a story in a novel normally induces are essential to maintain the interest of the story and to sustain the reader's attention. By having written the Prologue, Naipaul has completely, or largely, destroyed the expectancy and the suspense. At the very outset we are told what we should have been told by stages; and the premature death of Mr. Biswas should have come as a sudden shock to us. The Prologue is therefore something ill-conceived and a flaw in the construction of the plot. The Epilogue too contains certain vital facts. It is in the Epilogue that the circumstances of Mr. Biswas's death are conveyed to us, and it is in the Epilogue that the information about Owad's marriage to Dorothy's cousin is also conveyed. Now, these facts are essential to the story, and they should have been given to us through an independent concluding chapter rather than through an Epilogue. The use of the word "Epilogue" for this concluding section of novel is therefore somewhat unfortunate. The Prologue is faulty also in so far as no reference is made to what ultimately happens to Mrs. Tulsi.

The Division of the Novel Into Two Parts

The division of the novel into two parts is quite appropriate. The first part of the novel contains an account of Mr. Biswas's life and experiences in the Trinidad countryside; while the second part contains an account of his life and experiences chiefly in the capital city of Port of Spain with a chapter describing the stay of the Tulsi family and also of Mr. Biswas in a mountainous region called Shorthills. The division into two parts is legitimate also because, though the nature of Mr. Biswas's environment and experiences changes when he goes to Port of Spain, the outcome once again is a feeling of frustration and a sense of futility. At the end we find Mr. Biswas's ambition to own a house to have been fulfilled and yet not fulfilled. We close the novel with a feeling that Mr. Biswas had died after having won a triumph over the odds of life, and yet also with a feeling that the house is irretrievably mortgaged and that Mr. Biswas has died a premature death.

The Relevance of the Incidents in Part I of the Novel

None of the various chapters of this novel could have been dispensed with. Each chapter makes a distinct and useful contribution to the development of Mr. Biswas from the time of his birth to the time of his death. The first chapter called "Pastoral" acquaints us with the circumstances of Mr. Biswas's birth, and the move of the Biswas family from Parrot Trace to Pagotes. The second chapter gives us an account of Mr. Biswas's schooling and the futile efforts of his aunt Tara to establish him in life, first as a pundit and then as a liquor-dealer. This chapter also tells us the circumstances under which Mr. Biswas becomes a sign-painter. The next chapter describes the circumstances in which Mr. Biswas gets married to one of the Tulsi daughters, the failure of the marriage, Mr. Biswas's rebellion against the Tulsi-Seth tyranny, and his expulsion from Hanuman House. By now Mr. Biswas has developed into a full-fledged individual with a mind of his own. He is the kind of man who would not accept a position of servility. The next chapter describes the six years of his life at a village called The Chase. During this period he becomes the father of three children, and his anxieties have therefore increased. The stay at The Chase proves commercially to be an unsuccessful one, with the result that Mr. Biswas has again to depend upon the charity of the Tulsi family who now send him to their estate at Green Vale. The chapter called Green Vale is the most substantial in Part I. Here Mr. Biswas tries to build a house of his own. His desire to build a house symbolizes his urge to self-reliance and the assertion of his individuality. But the house remains incomplete, with the result that Mr. Biswas feels depressed by this failure. His depression is aggravated by his feeling of loneliness. Then he begins to be haunted by fears about his future and he begins to be tormented by various questionings. This mood of acute despondency verging on despair lasts till he falls gravely ill and is carried to Hanuman House to be nursed back to health. The effort to achieve independence has failed once again, and Mr. Biswas finds that Hanuman House is the only place where he could have taken refuge in the hour of crisis. The brief chapter called "A Departure" describes Mr. Biswas's farewell to Hanuman House. None of Mr. Biswas's experiences in Part I can be described as extraneous or unnecessary.

Mr. Biswas's Experiences in Part II of the Novel

The various chapters in Part II of the novel describe the new experiences which Mr. Biswas goes through in an altogether different environment. In the capital city of Port of Spain he becomes a newspaper reporter. He seems to achieve some success in this capacity, but soon, with the change of the editor, Mr. Biswas begins to feel most uncomfortable under the new regulations announced by the newspaper management. He experiences a feeling of relief when he gets another job, this time as a Community Welfare Officer in a

newly opened government department. But here again he faces certain difficulties and finds his job to be an irksome one. When, at Mrs. Tulsi's suggestion, he shifts to Shorthills, he finds that he has once again got an opportunity to build a house of his own and to achieve independence. He does build a house of his own at this place and even starts living in it with his family. But he is again pursued by bad luck. The house catches fire and is burned down. Once again he finds himself at the mercy of Mrs. Tulsi. Then he goes back to Port of Spain and is again accommodated in Mrs. Tulsi's house in that city. When Owad returns from England after his eight-year stay there, there is a good deal of hustle and bustle in Mrs. Tulsi's house where Mr. Biswas too is living with his family. Mr. Biswas had already been feeling fed up with his life in this house on account of the large number of noisy children who are living there; he was having no peace of mind at all; his work was an additional cause of mental stress to him. Now his patience is exhausted. He has a quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad, and he decides to quit Mrs. Tulsi's house. His next step is to buy a house of his own in Sikkim Street but in order to buy this house he has to take a large loan from his uncle Ajodha. But he does become the proud master of a house, and he shifts into it with his family. But his misfortunes have not ended. Anand, who had won a scholarship to study abroad, has not proved to be a success. This disappointment and the debt which Mr. Biswas had incurred in order to buy the house now begin to weigh upon his mind. Although he is happy enough with his ownership of the house and with his daughter's Savi success in life, there is much to make him feel miserable. He suffers two heart-attacks, the second of which ultimately leads to his death at the age of forty-six.

The Plot Not Compact or Well-Knit

This brief survey of the career of Mr. Biswas would seem to show that the plot of the novel is very compact and well-knit. But such is not the case. There is plenty of surplusage in the book. There is much that is superfluous and that could therefore have been left out or at least subjected to a rigorous compression. In some cases we find the author giving free reins to his imagination and being carried away by his own exuberance. Naipaul simply cannot exercise any control upon his tendency to develop and expand incidents and episodes to a length beyond the needful limits. He has an extraordinary flair for dwelling upon details, and he shows a strong tendency to squeeze out the maximum from even those characters who are merely incidental to the narrative. Indeed, Naipaul shows scant regard for form. He is wanting in what is known as architectonic skill.

Prolivity and Superfluities in Part I

The chapter called "Pastoral" is perfectly satisfactory. Here we have an example of a large number of facts and events conveyed

to us with due regard to economy. Indeed, the writing in this particular chapter is an excellent specimen of conciseness. But in the chapter called "Before the Tulsis", the account of Mr. Biswas's stay with Pundit Jairam and thereafter with Bhandat could have been, and should have been, compressed to one-third of its present length without sacrificing any of the satire in the portrayal of those two men. The next chapter, "The Tulsis", again contains nothing that can be called superfluous. The whole account of Mr. Biswas's life in the Tulsi household is essential as it stands, both from the point of view of the development of plot and of characterization. All the events narrated here are necessary in order to make his expulsion from Hanuman House credible. Then comes the chapter called "The Chase". Here the description of the village and of the shop is certainly essential. Naipaul's descriptions always serve a valuable purpose in creating the atmosphere and in bringing before our minds the environment in which his chief character lives. Some of the other events in this chapter have also been described in a manner which is perfectly satisfactory. But the account of Mr. Biswas's legal dispute with Mungroo should have been drastically curtailed, and also the events which follow that dispute. The description of the environs at Green Vale and of the barracks there is again fully acceptable. The incident of the doll's house too is necessary and therefore acceptable. The account of Mr. Biswas's anxieties and fears leading to his nervous breakdown is absolutely essential. But the entire description from the point at which Mr. Biswas begins to build his own house to the point at which he shifts into the incomplete building should have been reduced to one-fourth of its present length. Too much space has been devoted by the author to the manner in which the construction of the house drags on.

Dispensable Details and Circumstances in Part II

In Part II, we are given too many incidental details in the account of Mr. Biswas's journalistic work in the first chapter called "Amazing Scenes". In the second chapter called "The New Regime", Mr. Biswas's visits to Tara and Ajodha could have been described in a much briefer form. The account of the stay of the Tulsi family and of Mr. Biswas at Shorthills, in the chapter which follows, is rather prolix and should have been given to us in a more compact form. In the next chapter called "Among Readers and Learners", there are certain essential matters such as Anand's winning a scholarship and the change in Mr. Biswas's journalistic duties. But Mr. Biswas's visits to Ajodha and Tara, his visit to Bhandat in one of the slums in Port of Spain, his abortive visit to a cinema in the company of Anand, and his letter to Dr. Rameshwar, should certainly have been abridged. Here, again, we have a considerable superfluity of detail and circumstance. Judged by, and in, themselves, these details and circumstances are interesting enough; they are even entertaining. But as parts of a whole they are dispensable. Then comes the chapter called "The Void". Here the account of a new

job offered to and accepted by Mr. Biswas is perfectly valid, as is the account of another prolonged fit of depression from which Mr. Biswas suffers. But Miss Logie's taking Mr. Biswas and his whole family out for a picnic is a totally unnecessary episode which should simply have been kept out of the novel. The chapter called "The Revolution" deals wholly with Owad and is an interruption in the development of the real plot of the novel. The only important, and also the crucial, episode here is Mr. Biswas's quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad, and his decision to quit Mrs. Tulsi's house. There is nothing irrelevant in the next chapter called "The House", or in the Epilogue with which the novel ends.

Two Groups of Characters, Kept Entirely Separate

Another flaw in the structure of this novel is that no inter-connection has been established between the two groups of characters, one representing Mr. Biswas's family and the other representing Shama's family. While Mr. Biswas stays for the best part of his life with the Tulsi family in its various houses, he never loses touch with Tara, Ajodha, and the two sons of Bhandat. The author keeps returning to Mr. Biswas's relations who, having once been introduced into the story, could subsequently have been dispensed with at some stage but are not actually dispensed with by the author. If Tara, Ajodha, Jagdat, and Rabidat had to be retained in the story throughout, some inter-connection should have been established between these characters and the Tulsi household, either by way of a better understanding between the two groups or by way of an increased conflict between the two groups. As it is, the two groups of characters stand completely apart from each other, with Mr. Biswas as the only link between them. And even Mr. Biswas is no link, because his dealings with the Tulsi family are a matter entirely separate from his dealings with the relatives on his mother's side. An inter-weaving between the two groups of characters would have served to unify the various strands in the novel.

Q. 6. In what light does Naipaul depict Hindu Society in *A House for Mr. Biswas*?

Or

Discuss the clash of cultures as described in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

To what extent is the old Hindu culture influenced or distorted by contact with an alien culture in *A House for Mr. Biswas*?

Or

Estimate the impact of an alien culture on the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi family in *A House for Mr. Biswas*?

Or

Describe the results of culture-contact as described by Naipaul in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

Substantiate the view that Naipaul has, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, established the narrow, enclosed Hindu world with fidelity and minuteness.

The Duties of Daughters, Sons-in-Law, and Children

Hanuman House at Arwacas in Trinidad is the abode of the Tulsi clan which represents the old Hindu culture. Hanuman House was established by a pundit or a Hindu priest, a venerable man not only in Trinidad but also in India. This pundit by the name of Tulsi was an immigrant who had not gone to Trinidad as an indentured labourer. He was the head of the Tulsi clan in Trinidad and, before he died, he provided a house for the succeeding generations of the Tulsi family to live in and a large estate to live by. Contrary to the old Hindu custom, even the married daughters of Pundit Tulsi have settled down in Hanuman House. According to the Hindu custom, a married daughter goes away to live with her husband's family; but in this case the husbands of the married daughters also begin to live in Hanuman House. Furthermore, nearly all of the Tulsi daughters have married men in need of Tulsi money and Tulsi prestige. These men do not, therefore, mind living in Hanuman House even at the cost of their self-respect. Mrs. Tulsi, the widow of Pundit Tulsi, is now the head of the family in Hanuman House. Her late husband's brother, Seth, is her counsellor, her man of business, and the agent of her will. These two persons control the entire household and exercise all the authority. Some of Tulsi sons-in-law are slightly more important than others because of the higher functions which they perform. For instance, Hari is respected a little more than the others, because he functions as the family priest and performs the necessary rituals on all occasions. Then there is Govind, who may be regarded as the policeman guarding the prestige of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. In addition to such special functions, there is a clearly defined division of labour which is well demonstrated whenever Mrs. Tulsi has a fainting fit and when specific roles are performed by the selected women-folk like Sushila. The women-folk cook the general food and feed their individual husbands. The children are fed in common. Both mothers and widows punish the young ones for their unruliness. The Tulsi sons-in-law contribute to the commercial interest of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth by working on the Tulsi estates in various capacities. Fixed roles naturally lead to an awareness of duties, conventions, and rituals. After a quarrel with, or a beating by, her husband, a wife in Hanuman House adopts an air of martyrdom which must be publicly displayed as a sign of her married status. Once pregnancy begins, a wife must sigh and spit frequently. Her new baby must be bathed according to the traditional rules of the process—the piling, the pulling of arms and legs, and

the slapping. Friendly wives discuss the ailments of their husbands. In the event of a quarrel between two husbands, it becomes the duty of the wife of the victorious husband to beg the forgiveness of her defeated brother-in-law. Sons-in-law offending Mrs. Tulsi or Seth must be subjected to communal hostility, and the offender must show his repentance by making frequent and anxious inquiries after the health of Mrs. Tulsi. Daughters-in-law must show due respect towards their mothers-in-law; and Shama knows that it is her duty to weep at the funeral of her husband's mother, Bipti. Funerals are occasions when relatives must display extreme grief. Likewise, it is part of the social ritual to attend the weddings of other people's children so that similar events in one's own family may in turn be attended by other people. And it is through these social occasions that a person's social standing is enhanced. Thus it is that Shama's annoyance with Mr. Biswas for building a house at Green Vale is soothed when she realizes that it provides an opportunity for a house-blessing ceremony. And at ceremonies like these, Hindu ritual and tradition are again evident: the sexes are divided, and men and women sit apart. The house-blessing ceremony at The Chase emphasizes the importance of children in the Tulsi clan. Babies swarm everywhere at the shop, and in the residential portion of the building at The Chase. To the Tulsis, children are essential property: the more the better. The children can pick the lice in the hair of the old women, and they can increase the honour of the clan by their economic or academic achievement. That is why marriage needs to be a matter of "cat in bag" in the last resort, for children are the most important aspect of the marital union.

Old Hindu Culture, Seen in Miniature At Hanuman House

The Tulsi household represents the old Hindu culture in miniature. The family priest, Hari, performs the prescribed rituals and ceremonies on all occasions. The elderly and the old members of the clan receive due respect from their juniors. The authority of the two heads of the Tulsi clan is unquestioned. All the daughters and sons-in-law must dance attendance upon Mrs. Tulsi, and Seth's word is law in the house. Even the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi must receive due attention, and should be given the status of gods. A married daughter must show more regard for her own family and for the sentiments of her own family than for her husband and for his sentiments. The conservatism of the Tulsi family is evidenced by its opposition to the reformist and progressive views of the Arya Samaj. In short, Hanuman House is a microcosm of the old Hindu culture.

Mr. Biswas's Different Upbringing

The entry of Mr. Biswas into the Tulsi household creates a disturbance because his ideas are different from those which hold sway at Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas had spent his childhood and boyhood in an environment more liberal than the one which

prevails at Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas was descended from hut-dwelling peasants, and there was no single family house to keep various members of the family tied to one another. Thus Bipti, although dependent on her sister Tara, has to stay with some of the relations of Tara's husband in a back trace, away from Tara's own house. Bipti's two other sons, namely Pratap and Prasad, are sent to a distant relation in another town called Felicity. Bipti's daughter Dehuti has to live as a maidservant with Tara. Mr. Biswas, although living with his mother Bipti, becomes emotionally estranged from her. His father's hut had been sold by his mother to neighbours; his grand-parents are dead; and he had to begin his journey through life at an early age. He has experienced the comparative cosmopolitanism of primary school life; he has undergone the rigid discipline imposed on him by Pundit Jairam; and he then became a sign-painter through his contact with a Christian friend by the name of Alec. He had been taught by a teacher called Lal who was originally a Hindu but who had been converted to Christianity; he had come into contact with Bhandat and his two sons, all of whom have been leading un-Hindu sex lives. In view of this kind of early life, it is not surprising that Mr. Biswas finds himself out of place at Hanuman House which is a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, communal life, ritual duty, a hierarchical system and, in the eyes of its inmates, cultural infallibility. His rebellion against Tulsidom is but natural.

Traditonal Hindu Beliefs, Corroded By the Creole Culture

The old Hindu culture as typified by the Tulsi clan is by no means sacrosanct or inviolable. The author progressively shows us, in the course of the novel, the sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious way in which the western-oriented Creole* culture of Trinidad undermines and corrodes Hindu traditional customs and beliefs. The cultural confrontation between the Hindu customs and the western ideas leads to a change of attitudes on the part of the Indian settlers and also to a psychological bewilderment among them.

The Reasons Behind Mr. Biswas's Assault upon Tulsidom

It is the combination of the external forces of westernization and urbanization, aided by internal human impulses, which brings about the decay of the highly structured social organization operating at Hanuman House. Towards the end Mrs. Tulsi, the family head, herself suggests the plan to shift from Arwacas to Shorthills, as if she herself recognized the inadequacy of the ancestral home in the face of modern aspirations. The old Hindu culture receives a great blow when Mr. Biswas becomes one of the sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi. He openly disapproves of the Tulsi practices and policies. He even challenges their religious beliefs when he begins to attend the

*The word "Creole" refers to the European and Negro settlers in West Indies. CC-O. Agamnigam Digital Preservation Foundation, Chandigarh

lectures of an Arya Samaji missionary and begins openly to advocate the progressive and reformist ideas of Arya Samaj. He does not accept the superior and inferior gradings within the household and proves very disrespectful to the matronly Mrs. Tulsi and to her partner in authority, Seth. He mocks at the young Tulsi sons by calling them "gods". To the utter disgust of the entire household, he throws food upon the head of one of the gods and even spits upon him. Then he refuses to work for the Tulsis on the ground that he does not wish to lose his independence and that he would like "to paddle his own canoe". It is only because of economic necessity that he agrees to work first at a Tulsi shop and then as an overseer on a Tulsi estate. But even then he refuses to feel inferior to the Tulsis. In fact, he thinks himself superior to them because of his strong intellectual interests, because of his reading books by such authors as Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Samuel Smiles. He has vague ambitions of rising in life. And, above all, he has an inherent love of independence. Where the Tulsi clan is proud of the conformity among its members, Mr. Biswas finds pleasure in asserting his own individuality. He upsets the Tulsi apple-cart unpardonably when he buys a present for his daughter Savi without giving similar presents to the other children. He differentiates himself by speaking Creole English in Hanuman House while everyone else speaks Hindi. He ridicules Hari, the symbol of religious reverence and ceremony. He sees disorder in the communal family arrangements at Hanuman House. He feels the birth of yet another child as a psychological and economic burden on himself. This manifold rebellion proceeds not wholly from Mr. Biswas's love of independence and from his faith in his own individuality, but to a great extent from what he has already absorbed from an alien culture through his early experiences at school and elsewhere. In other words, Mr. Biswas himself becomes partly a representative of the alien western culture under the influence of which he makes an assault upon the old Hindu culture as represented by Tulsidom. The influence of western culture on Mr. Biswas is seen especially in his going to see a cricket match with a tin of cigarettes and a matchbox in his hand.

The Tulsi Family, Directly Influenced By an Alien Culture

But Mr. Biswas is not the only disruptive influence so far as the old Hindu culture in Trinidad is concerned. The Tulsi clan would have greatly been influenced by the alien western culture even if there had been no Mr. Biswas in their midst. The two gods, namely Shekhar and Owad, have been admitted to a Roman Catholic college without any suggestion from Mr. Biswas. The Tulsi family itself deemed it fit to send its budding young men to a Christian missionary college. As students of this college, the two young men have already started wearing crucifixes which are a sacred symbol of orthodox Christianity. Far from having inspired the two Tulsi sons to wear these crucifixes, Mr. Biswas makes fun of them for having fallen

under the spell of Christianity. And Govind's wife Chinta later uses Hindi incantations in combination with a candle and a crucifix. In this case again, Mr. Biswas has nothing to do with this development. When sickness strikes, Hindu prayers, Indian and African superstitions and western science are all called upon to contribute their healing and curative influences. Mrs. Tulsi herself yields to some of the Catholic practices while remaining a devout Hindu. Even long before this, the Tulsi family has been partly celebrating the Christmas festival and observing Christ's birthday by distributing gifts among the children. In fact, they have been observing this festival in good Creole style, with English apples, cakes, and ice creams and with Portuguese cherry brandy. Likewise, the Catholic-influenced Creole custom of eating salmon on Good Friday finds unquestioned acceptance in the Tulsi household. Mr. Biswas's own children attend a Sunday school, even though Mr. Biswas at one time speaks of Christianity as a superstition which was being exported wholesale to savages all over the world. Mr. Biswas himself joins the ranks of those Hindus who give Christmas presents to their children. He buys a doll's house for his daughter Savi as a Christmas present.

The Tulsi Sons, Cultural Converts

Nor has Mr. Biswas anything to do with certain other developments which show the influence of the alien Creole culture on the old Hindu culture. Although both Shekhar and Owad have been brought up according to orthodox Hindu customs, they both rebel against the conservatism of their family. Shekhar threatens to commit suicide when it is suggested to him that he should marry a particular girl from some Hindu family of status. He makes a complete break with his old culture by marrying a Christian wife and then by going away to live with his wife's family. Owad upsets some of his Hindu relatives by deciding to go abroad for his medical studies. Even some of the members of the Tulsi clan feel perturbed by Mrs. Tulsi's agreeing to send her son across the waters for his higher education. When Owad returns to Trinidad, he is a fully westernized man and he has not only been deeply influenced by western culture but has politically become a Communist preaching revolution. Subsequently, Owad too marries a Christian wife who is a cousin of Shekhar's wife, Dorothy. Thus, Owad too, like his brother, becomes a cultural convert.

Some Resistance By the Tulsis to the Alien Culture

Thus it is because of various influences that Tulsidom undergoes a change. Of course, the Tulsis try sometimes to resist these influences. For instance, women-folk in the Tulsi clan oppose Dorothy's way of life because it conflicts with their own. Dorothy wears European dresses; and she has European toilet habits. Her going for a holiday to South America offends the Tulsi women-folk as a piece of undesirable foreign influence. And Dorothy speaks Spanish to her

daughters in the very presence of the Tulsi women-folk. But this resistance to an alien culture proceeds more from jealousy than from any convictions.

The Beginning of the Disintegration of the Tulsi Clan

In fact, the Tulsi family has begun to fall under the influence of the alien western culture, and as a result of this influence has begun to disintegrate. Towards the end of the novel we learn that most of the married daughters of Mrs. Tulsi have gone away to live with their husbands' families. W.C. Tuttle, one of the Tulsi sons-in-law, is a glaring product of cultural cross-breeding. He is a strict Hindu but he is as interested in the material life as in the spiritual life. He has been modernized by his contact with the alien culture, and plays American recorded songs on his gramophone. Naipaul's account of the life of the Tulsi clan at Shorthills depicts a cultural transplantation, with Hari driving a taxi and wearing western suits, and with W.C. Tuttle buying a car and transporting the children to their schools in Port of Spain by that car. The Tulsis have realized the value of education and have started sending their children to city schools.

Other Signs of the Westernization of the Tulsi Clan

And there are other signs of the westernization of the Tulsi clan. In the urban life of Port of Spain, the individual family unit consisting of father, mother, and their children, becomes more important than ever it was at Arwacas. Besides, Hindi is now spoken much less than before. Trinidad's Creole English now begins to hold a sway upon the members of the Tulsi clan; and we are informed that the young generation of Tulsi children understand Hindi but cannot speak it well. At the same time, the Tulsi home in Port of Spain, in the Woodbrook area, becomes a brain-improving place for the children and, among the adults, an arena for competitions over status-symbols like cars, bicycles, glass cabinets, side-tables, suits, and radiograms. Indeed, Mr. Biswas himself begins to take pride in his suits and ties which he, like the Creole society, accepts now as symbols of westernization, progress, and respectability. He tempts his children to live in Port of Spain with European style food. He is very embarrassed when Anand loudly declares in a restaurant that Coca Cola tasted like "horse pee". When Mr. Biswas acquires a car, he exhibits mannerisms peculiar to the community of car-owners. Food-baskets, picnics, a seaside holiday become part of his existence now. Meanwhile, Shama begins to devote much attention to acquiring suits for her husband; she begins to mention names of important people without having actually met them; and she takes pleasure in the opportunity of conversing with a white woman, Miss Logie. The children too are very fastidious about their father's car; and they have started using words like "Mummy" and "Daddy" instead of "Mai" and "Bap". And, although Mother

India is still the sustaining dream of the old Hindus who long for cultural stability, the young people are caught in strong cultural cross-currents and cease to dream of returning to India. The first-generation Indians, who settled in Trinidad (whether in the countryside or in the city), see themselves as the last defenders of the old, pure, and noble Hindu culture.

Naipaul's Balanced Vision of the Two Cultures

Thus, among the issues treated in this novel is the problem of geographical uprooting of peoples and the results of culture-contact. Each uprooting brings a further weakening of traditional forces. And yet the old culture, though invaded by a new and alien one, is not quite swamped. In fact, Naipaul's vision of Trinidad Hindu society seems to be a balanced one. If Mr. Biswas vigorously claims independence and individuality and while he denounces the old Hindu code which tends to destroy the individual personality, Mr. Biswas at the same time does recommend and appreciate the positive benefits of that code. The old Hindu code provides a sense of security to all the members of a family or clan, and it ensures both psychological and financial support to those members in times of illness and distress. It seems that Naipaul himself wavers between a condemnation of both the old and the new systems. He certainly presents many aspects of Tulsidom in a ridiculous light, the name Hanuman House itself conveying the author's satirical intention. But at the same time the author shows that there is much that is petty, dishonest, and hypocritical in the new system, so that in the end there does not seem to be much to choose between the two.

Q. 7. Write a note on the symbolic elements in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

What symbolic devices does Naipaul use in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and with what effect?

Or

Discuss Naipaul's use of the symbolic technique in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

"The book is powerfully symbolic." Substantiate this view about *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

The Meaning of Symbolism

The use of symbolism is a technique which most modern novelists, dramatists, poets, and other literary writers employ in their work. Symbolism is a highly subtle and sophisticated technique. Naipaul has made abundant use of this technique in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Objects, localities, places, environment, actions, and even

persons may be endowed by an author with a meaning over and above their literal or surface meaning. This additional or deeper meaning is known as the symbolic meaning. Symbolism implies an indirect or suggestive method of communicating to the reader some idea or feeling which the author does not wish to express directly in so many words because a direct or explicit statement is likely to be regarded by the reader as a piece of moralizing or as an unwelcome obtrusion of the author's views upon the reader's attention. In the light of this explanation of the technique of symbolism, some of the principal symbols which occur in Naipaul's narration of the story in *A House for Mr. Biswas* may be considered briefly.

Hanuman House As a Symbol

Hanuman House is not just the abode of the Tulsi clan. It has a certain significance in addition to being just a residence. First, it has a symbolic name. To Mr. Biswas, this house seems to be a zoo with many specimens in it; the house for all its organization is more of monkey-business than anything else, and Hanuman was the monkey-god. At one point, in the course of the novel, Mr. Biswas explicitly calls it a "monkey-house". He also describes it as "a blasted zoo". Secondly, Hanuman House serves in the story as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural perfection (in the eyes of its inmates), ritual duty, hierarchy, and communal life. Describing the organization of this house, the author tells us that Mrs. Tulsi's daughters and their children had to sweep the floors, wash the clothes, cook the food, and serve also at the counters of the Tulsi Store. Mrs. Tulsi's sons-in-law, under Seth's supervision, had to work on the Tulsi estates, look after the Tulsi animals, and also occasionally lend a helping hand in the Tulsi Store. In return for such services, all the inmates were given food, accommodation, and a little money; the children were well looked after; and all the inmates were treated with respect by people outside in view of their connection with the Tulsi family. Some of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi, having married rich husbands enjoying a certain social position, had left Hanuman House and were living with their husbands' families and therefore formed no part of the Tulsi organization, but most of them settled down in Hanuman House itself with their husbands and gave birth to their children in that house. (Mrs. Tulsi had as many as fourteen daughters, besides two sons). Now, on a closer examination, we find that Hanuman House does not have such an attractive family organization as appears on the surface: the organization is in fact a slave-society built up by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to maintain their empire. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth exploit the homelessness and poverty of their sons-in-law who work for them in return for food, clothing, etc. Men are necessary in Hanuman House only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and as labourers on the Tulsi estates. To accept Hanuman House is to submit to slavery. The Tulsi daughters have no choice because they have known no other

world. It is only late in the story that education becomes a means of liberation from Hanuman House. For the major portion of the story the Tulsi daughters and their husbands have no real voice in the administration of Hanuman House; and whatever little authority they do have is derived from Mrs. Tulsi herself. There is a competition among the inmates for favours from Mrs. Tulsi, and Mrs. Tulsi knows how to distribute these favours so as to prevent undue rivalries and bitterness. Mr. Biswas rebels against the Tulsi household and its organization because he is a man of self-respect and has an independent nature. He simply cannot adjust himself to the conditions of slavery under which the others live in this house. The author has depicted the world of Hanuman House in such a way that the house becomes symbolic of darkness, stagnation, and decay. The house is described as a fortress, impregnable, windowless, slightly sinister. Its kitchen is full of blackness which is compared by the author to a solid substance. In fact, every other Tulsi home, at The Chase, at Green Vale, at Shorthills, and in Port of Spain also produces a similar impression. For instance, the shop at The Chase has walls which are black with soot as though a new species of spider had been bred there. The barracks at Green Vale have trees around them; these trees darken the road, and their rotting leaves choke the gutters. The house at Shorthills is soon reduced to a ramshackle decay. And round the house in Port of Spain the Tulsis build a symbolic wall. Hanuman House is also a place where the old Hindu rituals and ceremonies are scrupulously observed, even though the real spirit has gone out of them and only the shell remains. Some of the Tulsi daughters and the other women-folk have a little more authority than the others, thus producing an impression of a hierarchy which too is part of the old joint family system among the Hindus. Although every effort is made to preserve the old culture and the old Hindu taboos, the family cannot resist certain external and alien influences. The Tulsi sons, for instance, are attending a Roman Catholic educational institution and have begun to wear crucifixes. Hanuman House celebrates Christmas too; the children on Christmas Day receive presents very much as children in Christian families do. Thus Hanuman House symbolizes also the encroachment of a foreign culture on the old Hindu customs and beliefs. Despite its Christian leanings, Hanuman House is shocked when Mr. Biswas brings with him a heap of pamphlets advocating Christianity, after having previously felt shocked by his reformist ideas derived from the Arya Samaj.

The Symbolic Significance of the Barracks, and of the House Built There By Mr. Biswas

At Green Vale, Mr. Biswas and his family are given a room in the barracks. Now the term "barracks" suggests a regimentation of life. Mr. Biswas feels most uncomfortable in the barracks just as he had felt most uncomfortable at Hanuman House; and his discomfort arises from his incapacity to accept any kind of regimentation. There

was a regimentation of life at Hanuman House too; and therefore the move to Green Vale has brought to him only a partial relief by removing him from his close physical proximity to the Tulsi clan. So Mr. Biswas decides to build a house of his own. Now, this house, which he decides to build, would be more than a place where he can live. The new house would symbolize his personality; it would symbolize his private individuality which he must maintain against the rest of the world. The construction of this house parallels at all points his own development as a person.

The Symbolic Significance of the Doll's House

The whole episode of Mr. Biswas's giving his daughter Savi a Christmas present in the form of a doll's house and the repercussions of this action on his part have considerable symbolic significance. In the first place, his giving a doll's house to Savi symbolizes his aspiration to possess a house of his own. It is only a few days after giving this present to Savi that he asks Seth for some land on which he can build a house of his own at Green Vale. When Seth gives him the green signal, Mr. Biswas loses no time in sending for a Negro builder by the name of Mr. Maclean, and then buys the required materials for the house. The construction of the house begins soon afterwards. It is another matter that, on account of a shortage of funds, the house is never completed. It is also another matter that the time which Mr. Biswas spends in its one completed room is perhaps the most miserable in his whole life. The author gives us a very moving account of Mr. Biswas's morbid fears and apprehensions during the period Mr. Biswas spends in this one room. Mr. Biswas has brought Anand also to this place to stay with him and Anand has to share of the misery of his father. Secondly, Mr. Biswas's gift of a doll's house to Savi symbolizes another act of rebellion on Mr. Biswas's part against the Tulsi code of conduct and the Tulsi authoritarianism. Mrs. Tulsi asks him what he has brought for the other children, and feels extremely displeased when he says that he has brought nothing for the other children. It has always been Mrs. Tulsi's policy to treat all the children uniformly without discriminating in favour of or against any of the children. Mr. Biswas has violated this well-established convention by favouring his own daughter Savi. Shama has to bear the brunt of the criticism and the taunts delivered by her several sisters whose children have received nothing from Mr. Biswas. Shama feels so desperate because of the resentment of her sisters and the adverse remarks made by them that she shatters the doll's house and throws it on a heap of rubbish. Shama here acts unconsciously as an agent of the malice and the destructive power of the Tulsi family. When the doll's house has been smashed by Shama, it looks like a human body torn apart: "None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless." Mr. Biswas is shocked when he sees the broken and battered doll's house. The symbolic significance of this incident is quite clear. Anything which expresses individuality and

any deviation from the regimentation imposed by the orders of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth arouses hostility in Hanuman House. The reaction of the Tulsis to the doll's house is indicative of the terrible revenge which this communal organization can take upon anyone who dares to assert his personality or individuality. Thus Mr. Biswas's rebellion here becomes the rebellion of an individual against a communal way of life. Hanuman House, symbolically presided over by the monkey-god, is a communal organization whose continuance depends on a denial of personality to its inmates and a recognition of authority by those inmates. When, in course of time, the Tulsi autocracy becomes weak, the whole system disintegrates; and then we witness the anarchy of the family's stay at the house at Shorthills where naked self-interest asserts itself and where life returns to the law of the jungle as the beauty and luxuriance of the landscape are mercilessly destroyed, and where every one lives for himself, plundering the trees and calmly going about his own devilish plans.

The Symbolic Significance of Mr. Biswas's Longing to Own a House

Unable to tolerate his dependence upon the Tulsi family and unwilling to make a surrender of his self-respect, Mr. Biswas wishes to have a house of his own. This desire to own a house symbolizes an individual's wish to preserve his individuality. Mr. Biswas's house, built at Green Vale, remained incomplete, as we have noted above. He had moved into that incomplete house because he had hoped that "living in a new house in the new year might bring about a new state of mind." But the act of moving into the new house in the new year had brought him a further awareness of isolation, fear, incompleteness, and futility. The author informs us that there were many like Mr. Biswas who wanted to build houses but that the houses built by them remained incomplete thus reflecting the incompleteness of their lives. The author further informs us that the Main Road was lined with houses which were incomplete, unpainted, often sketched, with wooden frames which had grown grey while their owners lived in one or two imperfectly walled rooms. The house at Green Vale was subsequently burned down by the hostile labourers. Mr. Biswas then builds another house on the Tulsi estate at Shorthills. This house, built in the midst of a forest, symbolizes the isolation of his personality. This house has also to be abandoned. Towards the end of his career, Mr. Biswas lives in Port of Spain in a house made of odd scraps picked up wherever they could be found, in the same way in which Mr. Biswas had accumulated furniture and in the haphazard way in which he had formed relationships with various persons. Finally, Mr. Biswas and his family move into a jerry-built house in Sikkim Street. Mr. Biswas has bought this house with money a large portion of which had to be borrowed on interest. But at last the family has a house of their own. Mr. Biswas's ambition to own a house is at last fulfilled; and the fulfilment of this ambition brings him no small measure of joy. Mr. Biswas has not allowed his individuality to be overpowered or vanquished, despite the heavy odds and despite the heavy economic

pressures on his purse. Even though he dies a debtor, he has maintained his individuality and has liberated himself completely from the chains and shackles with which the Tulsi family had sought to bind and enslave him. The title of the novel is significant. Mr. Biswas wanted to own a house so as to be able to assert and preserve his independence. He is able to own a house at the end, even though he does not live long enough to enjoy its blessings. He dies a free man, with his self-respect and individuality intact. His rebellion against the Tulsi family has proved successful, and he has achieved freedom. The main theme of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is an individual's rebellion against social and economic tyranny and the attainment of freedom as a reward of that rebellion. Mr. Biswas's ownership and possession of a house symbolizes the freedom he has achieved.

The Symbolic Significance of Planting or Destroying Vegetation

The act of planting or destroying vegetation has also a symbolic significance in this novel. Planting vegetation symbolizes an acceptance of the land, while destroying vegetation symbolizes an exploitation of the land. Vegetation, like houses, reflects a mental or spiritual state. Mr. Biswas's feeling of temporariness is reflected in his attitude to plants. Knowing that his stay at The Chase was only temporary, he made no improvement and did not think it worth his while to plant trees which would bear flowers or fruit. At Green Vale he was in a state of mind verging on madness. However, he was able to keep madness away. Here he was surrounded by grotesque trees which looked sickly but not dead. He did not plant anything at Green Vale because he did not wish to claim this nightmarish existence. When, however, he does subsequently plant a garden, the action symbolizes his claim to ownership or at least to acceptance. In a happy mood while living in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain, he plants a garden; but when the Tulsis destroy the garden because they have to prepare for Owad's departure, Mr. Biswas realizes that the land does not belong to him. He tries to restore his garden but he works without heart because he does not know how much longer he would be allowed to stay there. When his stay in this house nears its end, Seth drives his lorries over the garden and completely destroys it, thus destroying at the same time Mr. Biswas's claim to the land and his will to live there. Finally, Mr. Biswas settles in his own house in Sikkim Street, and then again he plants flowers and trees. Getting some extra land to which he is legally entitled, he extends the boundary of this house and plants a laburnum tree in this extra space. He has found a home after a life-time of search and pursuit, and by planting flowers and trees he lays claim to "his portion of the earth".

Q. 8. Is Mr. Biswas's achievement in finally buying a house a triumph or a failure ? Give reasons for your answer.

Or

Comment on Mr. Biswas's purchase of a house towards the end of the story in Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Or

Relate briefly the circumstances in which Mr. Biswas finally buys a house of his own, and give your reactions to this purchase.

Both a Triumph and a Failure

Mr. Biswas's achievement in buying a house of his own towards the end of the story is both a triumph and a failure. It is a triumph because he has at last become the proud possessor of a house and has achieved a sense of ownership of a place where he and his family can lead a life of independence. His purchase of a house marks the fulfilment of a long-cherished ambition. But the acquisition of a house at the end is also a failure because, in the first place, the house suffers from a large number of defects which had not been perceived by Mr. Biswas at the time of the transaction; and, secondly, because the house is mortgaged to Mr. Biswas's uncle Ajodha, and there seems to be no possibility of the house being freed from the mortgage. Thus the sense of ownership is incomplete, while the defects in the house greatly mar Mr. Biswas's joy in having bought the house. As a critic puts it, the conclusion of the story is ambivalent. At the time of his death of a heart-attack at the age of forty-six, Mr. Biswas is no doubt living in his own house ; but he is unemployed; his house is a structural disaster; and the mortgage is well beyond any possible means of payment. However, dubious as Mr. Biswas's victory seems, it is still better than death in the house of the Tulsis.

Mr. Biswas's Dissatisfaction With the Accommodation at The Chase

From the time of his marriage to Shama, Mr. Biswas has been feeling utterly frustrated because of his dependence on the Tulsis not only for his maintenance but also for residential accommodation. Even when he is provided with some measure of independence by being sent to look after the Tulsi food-shop at The Chase, his feeling of relief remains strictly limited because of the unsatisfactory condition of the shop and the room which he occupies. When Mrs. Tulsi says to him in a complacent tone that the shop at The Chase is "a nice little property" for him, he informs her in a sarcastic tone that the roofs of both the shop and the bed-room leak during rains and that the accommodation is woefully inadequate. When she suggests that he should make use of a sugarsack in order to cover the gallery and thus gain extra accommodation, he inwardly says that he would like to bury her in a sugarsack. He then mocks at her by asking her to send him a coal-barrel because his whole family would be able to live in that coal-barrel. Thus Mr. Biswas still harbours a feeling of bitterness against the Tulsis even though living separately from the Tulsis and enjoying some degree of freedom. There is no doubt that some time later his attitude towards Hanuman

House undergoes a slight change for the better. Now he realizes that Hanuman House is a kind of sanctuary where he can go whenever he wishes; and so he starts going to Hanuman House very often and even tries to win the favour of the various inmates there. However, the feeling of bitterness is not completely nullified by this feeling of appreciation of Hanuman House.

Mr. Biswas's Ill-Fated House At Green Vale

At Green Vale, Mr. Biswas begins to feel even more bitter because he finds the one room, which has been assigned to him in the barracks there, to be most uncomfortable. His having to live in this room deepens the morbid streak in his nature. The barrack-yard with its mud and its animal droppings gives him nausea. When Seth gives him the money which he has obtained from the insurance company as compensation for the shop at The Chase having been burned down, it occurs to Mr. Biswas that he should build a house of his own. He then makes his plan about the kind of house he would like to have. He wants a real house, made with real materials. He does not want mud for walls, earth for floor, tree-branches for rafters, and grass for roof. He wants wooden walls; he wants a galvanized iron roof; and he wants a wooden ceiling. He also plans a house standing on tall concrete pillars so that he might get two floors instead of one, and so that the way may be left open for future development. Accordingly, Mr. Biswas, after getting a clearance from Seth, gets into touch with a builder by the name of Mr. Maclean; and the construction of the house begins. He tells Mr. Maclean that he wants two bed-rooms and a drawing-room. Mr. Biswas does not have much money with him but he thinks that he would be able to save enough every month from his salary to be able to meet the expenses of the construction as it progresses. His intention to borrow money from Ajodha comes to nothing. As the construction proceeds, it is found that the cost of real materials would exceed Mr. Biswas's capacity to pay. The result is that, at Mr. Maclean's suggestion, second-hand and unsatisfactory materials have to be used for the construction. For instance, instead of mastic cement, pitch has to be used. In spite of all the economy, however, the house remains incomplete because of a shortage of money. Only one of the two bed-rooms is fit for habitation, and Mr. Biswas moves from the barracks into this bed-room thinking that the feeling of living in his own house would make him cheerful. But now another circumstance adds to the misery which he is experiencing on account of his failure to have completed the house. This circumstance is his loneliness caused by Shama's going away frequently to Hanuman House and spending long periods of time there. Mr. Biswas has also begun to experience certain fears about his future. All this brings about a nervous breakdown as a result of which Mr. Biswas is carried to Hanuman House to be nursed back to health. Subsequently, the incomplete house which Mr. Biswas had built is burned down by the labourers. And once more Mr. Biswas is houseless and has to depend on the charity of Mrs. Puri and Seth.

In Mrs. Tulsi's City House

When Mr. Biswas moves to Port of Spain, he has to stay with his sister Dehuti and her husband Ramchand. They accommodate him gladly enough, but he is a dependant once more. After he has secured a job as a newspaper reporter, Mrs. Tulsi offers him accommodation in her own house in Port of Spain on a nominal rent. There is no choice before Mr. Biswas but to accept this offer which will enable him to bring his family also to Port of Spain. Accordingly, he now moves into Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain; and once again he finds himself a dependant more or less. Poor Mr. Biswas! He has not yet been able to achieve his desire to have a house of his own. The title of the novel is really very appropriate because the story deals mainly with Mr. Biswas's effort to have a house of his own, or to acquire his own "portion of the earth".

Rendered Homeless At Shorthills

Then Mrs. Tulsi shifts to Shorthills, and she invites Mr. Biswas also to join her there. Mr. Biswas accepts this offer also since it would mean some saving from his meagre income because at Shorthills he would not have to pay any rent to Mrs. Tulsi. So he and his family shift to Shorthills. Here once again Mr. Biswas thinks of building a house of his own; and this time he does carry out his project fully. When the house is complete, he moves into it with his family; and now we might think that at last Mr. Biswas has become an independent man possessing a house of his own. But this time fate plays a cruel trick upon him. The house catches fire accidentally, and Mr. Biswas is again rendered homeless. Once again he moves into Mrs. Tulsi's house at Shorthills.

Compelled to Quit Mrs. Tulsi's House in Port of Spain

From Mr. Tulsi's house at Shorthills, Mr. Biswas soon moves with his family back to Port of Spain where he is provided with two rooms in Mrs. Tulsi's house where he had lived before also. Mr. Biswas and his family are not the only ones to move from Shorthills to Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. The Tuttles also go; and so do Govind, Chinta, and their children; and a widow by the name of Basdai also goes thither. With such a large crowd in this house, there is no peace for Mr. Biswas. Basdai, the widow, adds to the crowding in the house by taking boarders and lodgers from Shorthills. On account of the insanitary conditions prevailing in the house, Mr. Biswas's children begin to suffer from various ailments. Mr. Biswas now feels mentally perturbed all the time. Not having a house of his own makes him miserable. The noise in the house becomes unbearable for Mr. Biswas when W.C. Tuttle buys a gramophone and begins playing a particular record on it over and over again. Mr. Biswas's failure as a writer of short stories and the change in his duties from that of a newspaper reporter to that of an investigator of deserving destitutes add to his misery. His

misery does not end even when he becomes a government official. In this state of mind he one day quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi and with Owad who has returned to Trinidad after his eight-year stay in England and who has taken up his residence in the same house. In anticipation of Owad's return, Mr. Biswas had been asked to vacate the two rooms which he was occupying; and he had been given one other room in lieu of those two. In the course of the heated quarrel, Mr. Biswas becomes furious so that Mrs. Tulsi asks him to quit her house and he says that he has no desire at all to continue living here.

A House in Sikkim Street, Purchased With Borrowed Money

Now it becomes absolutely essential for Mr. Biswas to find some other accommodation for himself and his family. In the course of his search for accommodation he happens to meet a solicitor's clerk in a cafe. The solicitor's clerk has somehow come to know that Mr. Biswas urgently needs residential accommodation. The solicitor's clerk, who is actually a crook, now invites Mr. Biswas to lunch in a nearby restaurant and, in the course of the meal, he informs Mr. Biswas that he wants to sell his house, which is situated in Sikkim Street, because his mother, having developed heart trouble, cannot climb up to the upper story of the house. Mr. Biswas accompanies the solicitor's clerk to the latter's house in Sikkim Street in pouring rain to take a look at the house. Mr. Biswas feels greatly impressed by the look of the house. The solicitor's clerk says that he is willing to sell the house for six thousand dollars; but the bargain is struck at five thousand and five hundred dollars. Mr. Biswas has only a thousand and five hundred dollars with him; and so he borrows four thousand dollars from his uncle Ajodha in order to pay for the house.

Defects in the House, and the Heavy Cost of Repairs

Mr. Biswas had failed to inspect this house closely. When he and his family move into the house, they discover several defects in it. The house has no back door. Two of the wooden pillars supporting the staircase-landing are rotten. In fact, the staircase is dangerous because at every step it shakes. Mr. Biswas now realizes that the solicitor's clerk is a jerry-builder. In his rage Mr. Biswas refers to the solicitor's clerk as a tout, as a crook, as a Nazi, and as a blasted Communist. The house demands certain urgent repairs, and this means more expense. By the time the repairs are carried out, Mr. Biswas has no more money left with him so that Shama feels compelled to borrow two hundred dollars from Basdai, the widow who keeps boarders and lodgers. But at last Mr. Biswas and his family can leave Mrs. Tulsi's house.

A Redeeming Feature of the House

After Mr. Biswas and his family have shifted into their own house, a neighbour informs Mr. Biswas that the solicitor's clerk is a real cheat, a fraud, a speculator who has made it a habit to build

ramshackle, fragile houses and give them a decent look in order to sell them at a big profit. However, in the midst of this disappointment, there is a cheering development. Mr. Biswas discovers that he is entitled to some additional space, about twelve feet wide, around his house. In this extra space Mr. Biswas plants a laburnum tree. The tree grows rapidly and gives to the house a romantic look. Its flowers are sweet, and in the hot evenings their smell fills the house. The defects of the house are forgotten; and, in any case, thorough repairs have already been carried out. Thus Mr. Biswas has every reason to feel happy with the house that he has acquired.

The Acquisition of a House, a Mixed Blessing

We certainly feel very happy at this point because Mr. Biswas has achieved the fulfilment of his dream which was to possess a house and lead an independent and self-respecting life. We therefore share Mr. Biswas's and his family's sense of jubilation at their having acquired a house. But in the very next chapter he learns of certain other disappointments which Mr. Biswas suffers. His son Anand belies the high hopes which Mr. Biswas had been entertaining about him. Gloomy letters come from Anand; and there seems to be no hope of his returning to Trinidad. Besides, the thought of having to repay the loan of four thousand dollars begins to weigh heavily on Mr. Biswas's mind. And so the acquisition of a house proves, after all, to be only a mixed blessing, a partial failure and a partial triumph.

Q. 9. Write short notes on

- (a) **The Childhood of Mr. Biswas**
- (b) **Hanuman House.**

(a) The Childhood of Mr. Biswas : Birth and the Predictions

The birth of Mr. Biswas takes place in the midst of certain bad omens. In the first place, he is born at the hour of midnight which is thought to be inauspicious. Secondly, the boy is born in the wrong way. Thirdly, the boy is born with six fingers. The midwife says that, no matter what precautions are taken, this boy will eat up his own mother and father. The pundit, who is summoned to make predictions about the boy's future, says that the boy will grow up to be a lecher, a spendthrift, and a liar because there will be gaps and spaces between his teeth, and because these gaps would not be a good sign. The six fingers, according to the pundit, are also a bad sign. The pundit then advises the family to keep the boy away from trees and water, and particularly from water. Another sad thing about the boy is that he would have an unlucky sneeze, says the pundit. The pundit also says that much of the evil relating to the boy will be mitigated if his father is forbidden to see him for twenty-one days. On being asked what name should be given to the boy, the pundit says that the name should begin with "Mo",

whereupon the name "Mohun" is selected, the full name being "Mohun Biswas".

The Attentions Paid to Mr. Biswas

Mr. Biswas sheds his sixth finger before he is nine days old. The sixth finger simply falls off one night. The boy's grandmother thinks this to be an excellent sign. She buries the finger at the back of the house. In the days which follow Mr. Biswas is treated with attention and respect. His brothers and sister are slapped if they disturb his sleep. Morning and evening his body is massaged with coconut oil, and all his joints are exercised. Mr. Biswas responds well to these exercises; and his grandmother becomes so confident that she holds a celebration on the ninth day. She invites people from the village to feed them. The pundit too is invited. He comes and behaves in a most gracious manner. Jhagru, the barber, brings his drum, and Selochan performs the Shiva dance, his body being smeared with ash. When Mr. Biswas's father, Raghu, comes to see the boy, he is told that the boy was born six-fingered, that he was born in the wrong way, and that he has an unlucky sneeze. Raghu is then told that he would be allowed to see the boy only on the twenty-first day of the boy's birth, such being the advice given by the pundit. Accordingly, Raghu goes back and comes again on the twenty-first day when he is shown the face of the boy as reflected in coconut oil in accordance with the pundit's instructions.

The Unlucky Sneeze and Its Evil Results

A few days later Mr. Biswas's mother returns with all her children to her husband's house which she had left on the eve of Mr. Biswas's birth as a consequence of a quarrel which had taken place between her and Raghu. Mr. Biswas's importance now steadily diminishes. The time comes when even the daily massage ceases. The family never forgets that Mr. Biswas was born unlucky and that his sneeze is particularly unlucky. Mr. Biswas catches cold easily and therefore sneezes often. Raghu feels terribly afraid of leaving the house for his work in the fields if Mr. Biswas happens to sneeze at that particular time. On such occasions Raghu stays indoors. Even so, minor mishaps do occur when Mr. Biswas sneezes. Once Mr. Biswas sneezes on three mornings in succession, and his father thereupon says that this boy would certainly eat up his family. On one occasion when Raghu ignores Mr. Biswas's sneeze and leaves for work, he is knocked down by an ox-cart and is badly injured. Raghu's remark on this occasion is that this boy would make the whole family paupers.

Malnutrition and Its Consequences. As a Member of the Grass-Gang

As time passes, Mr. Biswas receives less and less attention. The limbs which used to be massaged and oiled twice a day now

remain dusty and muddy and unwashed for days. As a result of malnutrition, he begins to suffer from eczema and sores; and even his growth is somewhat retarded. He has a narrow chest and very thin limbs. Besides, he develops a large belly. And yet he keeps growing. He never feels conscious of being hungry. It does not bother him that he does not go to school. Life is unpleasant for him only because the pundit had forbidden him to go near ponds and rivers. While his brothers go with their father to swim in a stream not far off, Mr. Biswas plays at home with his sister Dehuti. In course of time, Mr. Biswas is made to join the boys and girls of the grass-gang, his duty being to carry bundles of grass on his head from the fields to the homes of the owners. The boy's future does not seem to be very bright. A few years later he would move to the sugarcane fields to work there, and there he would remain. He would never become a driver or a weigher because he is not going to any school and would not be able to read. Actually, however, Mr. Biswas does not have to go to work on the sugarcane fields. Events which occur soon afterwards lead him away from that fate. They do not lead him to wealth and riches, but they make it possible for him to console himself in later life with the writings of Marcus Aurelius.

The Missing Calf

Then Mr. Biswas is entrusted with a new duty. Dhari, the next-door neighbour, hires the services of Mr. Biswas to look after his calf and to take it to water daily at a penny a week. Mr. Biswas now starts taking the calf to water and to the fields of grass in order to feed it. In the course of his wanderings, Mr. Biswas one day discovers the stream where his brothers used to go to swim. From that day onwards he begins going to the stream regularly even though he had been forbidden to go there. The stream offers endless delights to the boy. Often he tries to catch the fish swimming in the water, though he never succeeds. Then one day Mr. Biswas loses the calf. He had forgotten the calf while watching the fish and, when he remembers it, he does not find it anywhere. He hunts for it along the banks and in the adjoining fields but cannot find it. He comes to the conclusion that the calf would be able to look after itself and would somehow make its way back to its mother in Dhari's house. In the meantime, the best thing for him to do would be to hide until the calf is found. Accordingly, he goes home at dusk and hides himself under his father's bed.

Mr. Biswas's Responsibility for His Father's Death

As Dhari becomes anxious about his calf, he comes to Mr. Biswas's house and asks where Mr. Biswas is. Nobody seems to know where the boy is. Dhari says that the calf might have got drowned in the pond. Lakhan, the carter, says that even the boy might have got drowned in the pond. Thereupon Mr. Biswas's father goes to the pond and dives into the water in order to search

for the boy and the calf. He is able to find the calf which had been drowned, but he cannot trace the boy. While making another effort to find the boy, Raghu is himself drowned, while at this time Mr. Biswas is hiding under his father's bed at home. Thus the boy has really eaten up his father.

Admitted to a School. Friendship with Alec

Some time after Raghu's death, the family gets scattered. Mr. Biswas's two brothers go to work in a distant town called Felicity while his sister Dehuti begins to live with Bipti's sister, Tara. Bipti and Mr. Biswas also shift from their village to Pagotes where Tara accommodates them in a house belonging to her husband. At Pagotes, Mr. Biswas is admitted to the Canadian Mission School where he becomes friendly with a Christian boy by the name of Alec. In Alec's company Mr. Biswas plays all the pranks which boys generally indulge in. With Alec he puts six-inch nails on the railway track to have them flattened and to make them into knives and bayonets. Together the two boys go to the Pagotes river and smoke their first cigarettes. They tear off their shirt buttons and exchange them for marbles. They sit at the same desk, talk, are flogged by the teacher and separated, but they always come together again. At school Mr. Biswas shows a talent for neat and attractive writing of letters, whereupon the teacher contemptuously calls him a sign-painter.

The End of His Schooling

Mr. Biswas attends this school for nearly six years and for all that time he remains friendly with Alec even though he knows little about Alec's home life. Mr. Biswas and Alec are friends, but they have never visited each other's house. At the end of six years or so, Mr. Biswas is withdrawn from the school and sent to Pundit Jairam's house in order to be trained to become a pundit.

(b) Hanuman House : The Residence of the Tulsi Clan

Hanuman House, the residence of the Tulsi clan, was a timber-and-corrugated-iron building in the High Street at Arwacas. It stood there like an alien white fortress. Its concrete walls were very thick; and, when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed, the house appeared to be bulky, unconquerable, and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits. On its flat roof was a statue of the monkey-god Hanuman. From the ground the features of this statue could not clearly be seen. Hanuman House was presided over by a widow, Mrs. Tulsi, whose husband had died in a motor-car accident, leaving behind considerable property and houses situated at various places. Mrs. Tulsi had a large number of daughters, most of them already married but continuing to live in Hanuman House with their husbands and children. She also had two sons.

She was held in great respect and awe by all the inmates of Hanuman House. She ruled over her family with the help of Seth, a brother of her dead husband. Seth too lived in Hanuman House with his wife Padma. In fact, there was a regular hierarchy for the governance of Hanuman House. At the top were Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. Next to them in authority were Padma and Sushila. Then came the others in the order of seniority.

The Organization of Hanuman House

The organization of the Tulsi house was extremely systematic and orderly. Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a Negro woman who was called "Blackie" by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, and "Miss Blackie" by everyone else. Mrs. Tulsi's daughters and their children had to sweep the floors, to wash the clothes, to cook, and also to do some work in the Tulsi Store which sold miscellaneous goods. Mrs. Tulsi's sons-in-law worked on the Tulsi land under Seth's supervision; they looked after the Tulsi animals; and they too served in the Tulsi Store. In return they were all given food, shelter, and a little money. The children were well looked after. Although the Tulsi sons-in-law had to do all kinds of menial jobs, they were treated with respect by the people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. After getting married into the Tulsi family, these men had merged their identities with this family; in fact, they had themselves become Tulsis. Instead of taking their wives away with them to live in their own homes or with their own parents, these sons-in-law had agreed to settle down in Hanuman House. They had no lives of their own. They had become cogs in the wheel of the organization of Hanuman House. One of the sons-in-law, by the name of Hari, often functioned as the family priest. Another son-in-law, by the name of Govind, worked mainly in the fields. The two sons of the Tulsis received preferential treatment and were served special meals.

Mrs. Tulsi's Fainting Fits

Whenever Mrs. Tulsi fell ill, the whole house was thrown into a tumult. All her daughters get busy in looking after her. She was carried to her room called the Rose Room where one daughter massaged her legs, another massaged her head, and another fanned her. One of the daughters called Sushila, and Seth's wife Padma, had a special responsibility for nursing Mrs. Tulsi if she felt unwell. Whenever any son-in-law committed any indiscretion, Mrs. Tulsi fainted or pretended to have fainted, whereupon everybody would rush to her side to attend upon her. In fact, her illnesses and fainting fits were a part of her strategy as the ruler of Hanuman House.

A Life of Subordination for the Tulsi Sons-in-law

After getting married to one of the Tulsi daughters, Mr. Biswas found that he too, like the other sons-in-law, was expected

to lead a life of subordination to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. Being a self-respecting and independent-minded young man, he could not accept such a position. He therefore rebelled against the system prevailing in Hanuman House, and soon came to be known as a trouble-maker. Mrs. Tulsi expected unquestioning allegiance and obedience from all her daughters and sons-in-law. Seth acted as her right-hand man in enforcing discipline. Regular *puja* was performed at Hanuman House, and religious observances were a regular feature of life in this house. Mrs. Tulsi was a woman of strong orthodox views. In fact, the whole family was rigidly conservative. For instance, it was not thought necessary or proper to educate the girl-children. Seth got very annoyed with Mr. Biswas when the latter, under the influence of Arya Samaj, spoke of the rights of women. Mr. Biswas became a severe critic of the Tulsi household, and he made all sorts of disparaging and contemptuous remarks about various members of the Tulsi family. It became Mr. Biswas's strong desire to liberate himself from the stranglehold of the Tulsi household.

A Symbol of Traditionalism and Dictatorship

Hanuman House was not merely the abode of the Tulsi family. It also serves as a symbol in the novel. It symbolizes traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility (to its inmates), ritual duty, hierarchy, and communal life. At Hanuman House nobody can develop his or her own individuality. To live at Hanuman House means the extinction of one's individuality. Hanuman House is a symbol also of the solidarity of a clan or family. It represents the traditional joint family system of the Hindu community, even though in course of time the system disintegrates. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth rule like dictators but ultimately their authority dwindles because they themselves cannot maintain a united front. In course of time various members of the family move away from Hanuman House and by the end of the story it becomes a deserted place.

10. Write short notes on the following :

- (a) The first meeting between Mr. Biswas and Shama.
- (b) Mr. Biswas's feelings on moving into his new house.

(a) The First Meeting Between Mr. Biswas and Shama

Mr. Biswas to Paint Signs for the Tulsi Store

After leaving Bhandat's rum-shop, Mr. Biswas became a sign-painter and began to work in collaboration with his old school-friend Alec. It was as a sign-painter that he went to Hanuman House where he was engaged to paint signs for the Tulsi Store. Seth told him that he was being given the job only because he was an Indian and even more so because he was a Hindu. Mr. Biswas found the Tulsi Store a disappointing place. The shop looked quite ugly because of a large number of columns which supported its roof.

His job was to paint signs on all these columns. The shop was looked after by a large number of assistants with an expression of earnestness on their faces but without any enthusiasm for the work they had to do.

Stealing Glances at Shama

Mr. Biswas was suprised to learn that all the shop-assistants were members of the Tulsi family living in Hanuman House. Some of the girls working in the store were apparently unmarried. Mr. Biswas felt an urge to stare at the girls but thought it risky to do so. However, in the course of his work, he did steal glances at the girls attending to their customers at the various counters. He found that the most attractive of the girls was one called Shama who was about sixteen years of age. This girl had a medium height; she had a slender but firm body; her features were fine; and, although her voice was not quite sweet, Mr. Biswas felt enchanted by her smile. Mr. Biswas's thoughts now often centred round this girl. He felt a strong urge to talk to her, but he realized the danger involved. The presence of her sisters and brothers-in-law in the Store had a damping effect on his spirits. And then there was Seth who often appeared in the Store unexpectedly. In spite of all these handicaps, Mr. Biswas began to stare at Shama with a growing frankness and boldness. If she happened to look at him, he would promptly change the direction of his eyes and would appear to be very busy with his paint-brushes; and he would also shape his lips as if he were whistling softly. Actually, he could not whistle at all. All he did was to expel air almost soundlessly through the gap in his top teeth.

Shama's Response to His Staring

Mr. Biswas now noticed that Shama was responding to his stares. This made him feel that a certain communion had been established between him and her. So, when he met Alec next time, Mr. Biswas told him that he had got a sweetheart in Arwacas. Alec replied in a congratulatory tone that such things happened when one least expected them. In a few days the news of his having got a sweetheart at Arwacas reached many ears, among them those of Bhandat's younger son, Rabidat. However, Rabidat's reaction was that Mr. Biswas was simply telling lies.

The Consequence of His Love-Note to Shama

On the next day when Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House, he carried a note in his pocket. He had written the following words in this note : "I love you and I want to talk to you." His plan was to hand over this note to Shama in order to convey his feelings to her because he could not have found an opportunity of directly talking to her without first informing her of his intention. However, as Shama was attending to the customers at her counter, Mr. Biswas could not hand over the note to her. So he put it under a piece of

cloth at her counter. She saw him putting the note on her counter, but she looked away and smiled. It was not a smile of co-operation or pleasure; it was a smile which conveyed to Mr. Biswas her feeling that he had made a fool of himself. He felt extremely foolish, and wondered whether he should not take back his note and drive out all thoughts of Shama from his mind. But the note fell into Mrs. Tulsi's hands and, on the basis of the message which it contained, she and Seth proposed that Mr. Biswas should marry Shama. It became simply impossible for Mr. Biswas to refuse this offer even though, while writing the note, he did not have any definite intention to marry the girl. He was then hustled into a marriage with Shama by both Mrs. Tulsi and Seth working in close collaboration. The marriage took place at the registrar's office, and Mr. Biswas discovered that he was to receive no dowry at all and that his mother-in-law did not even intend to offer him a suitable job or a separate house for his residence. At Hanuman House the conditions of life were such that Mr. Biswas could not accept them. So, though married to Shama, he slipped out of Hanuman House and went back to Pagotes.

An Ignominious Return to Hanuman House

After Tara had negotiated with Mrs. Tulsi with regard to the conditions on which Mr. Biswas was to live at Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas had no alternative but to return to that place and take up residence there. Till then he had not touched Shama, much less embraced her. But now he had to reconcile himself to the marriage. On his return she mockingly asked him if he had come back because he had felt tired of catching crabs in Pagotes. He retorted that he had come back in order to help all the inmates of this house to catch crabs. Nobody else made any comment on his return; and Mr. Biswas's married life thus began on a rather unpleasant note. This unpleasantness was to continue for many years.

(b) Mr. Biswas's Feelings on Moving into His New House

The Defects in the House, Discovered

On a Thursday Mr. Biswas took his wife and children in his Prefect car to Sikkim Street in order to show them the house which he had purchased. Mr. Biswas had originally not been able to inspect the house closely because it had been raining heavily at the time. Now he and Shama discovered many defects in the house for which Mr. Biswas had paid five thousand five hundred dollars to the solicitor's clerk. Mr. Biswas discovered the absence of a back door. Shama discovered that two of the wooden pillars supporting the staircase-landing were rotten. In fact, the staircase was found to be dangerous, because at every step it shook. Shama said that they would have to carry out a few repairs before they could actually move into the house. In the days which followed the family made more discoveries. The water from the tap simply ran into the

ground, and Shama apprehended the danger of the ground subsiding. Then they discovered that the yard had no drainage of any kind. When it rained, the water from the roof fell directly to the ground, turning the yard into mud and splattering the walls and the doors. They also discovered that none of the windows downstairs would close. They discovered that the front door, which looked elegant with white wood-work, flew open in a strong wind even when it was locked and bolted. The other drawing-room door did not open at all. These discoveries made Mr. Biswas describe the solicitor's clerk as a jerry-builder, as a tout, as a crook, as a Nazi, and as a blasted Communist. The solicitor's clerk had left the radio-set behind after vacating the house as if he were doing a favour to the new occupant of the house. But Mr. Biswas learnt that he had to pay two dollars a month as the rental for the radio-set. Then there would be the land-rent to pay; and there would be the interest on the loan which he had taken from Ajodha. Mr. Biswas was discovering commitments almost as fast as he discovered the house.

The Solicitor's Clerk, a Real Cheat

By the time the repairs to the house were carried out, Mr. Biswas had run out of all the money; and as a result Shama found it necessary to borrow two hundred dollars which she obtained from Basdai, the widow who kept boarders and lodgers in Mrs. Tulsi's house. At last Mr. Biswas and his family left the Tulsi House, transporting all their furniture and other belongings by a lorry which they hired for the purpose. A neighbour informed Mr. Biswas that the solicitor's clerk was a real cheat, a speculator who built houses with inferior materials and then sold them at a high profit. The neighbour described the solicitor's clerk as "a joke". Building houses had been a hobby with that man. "He would pick up window-frames here and there; he would pick up a door here and another there; and he used these materials in building a new house. "A real disgrace. I don't know how the City Council passed this house", said the neighbour.

A Visit by the Tuttles. Some Memories of the Past

Then one day the Tuttles called on Mr. Biswas and his family to take a look at the house which they had purchased. The Tuttles were deceived by the external elegance of the house just as Mr. Biswas had been. The Tuttles too did not perceive that inferior materials had been used in the construction of the house. In fact, Mrs. Tuttle began to envy Shama for having acquired this house. It was an old house, said Mrs. Tuttle, but it had plenty of accommodation; and Shama replied that she did not want anything bigger and that all she wanted was "something small and nice" which she had got. W.C. Tuttle agreed and said: "Yes. Something nice and small. That, to me, is the beauty of it." Soon the children became accustomed to living in this house. It seemed to them that they had never lived anywhere else. In this valley, square to the street, Sikkim Street.

Mr. Biswas now thought that the lives of his children would become systematic. The memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, and the Tulsi house in Port of Spain passed through his mind. It seemed to him that all those memories would in course of time be forgotten.

Additional Space Around the House

Although Mr. Biswas had mentally devised many tortures to which he was going to subject the solicitor's clerk, he took care to avoid going to the cafe which the solicitor's clerk was in the habit of visiting. One day the solicitor's clerk came to the locality in which Mr. Biswas now lived in the house purchased by him. He informed Mr. Biswas that he was going to build another two-storeyed house close to Mr. Biswas's house. Mr. Biswas became furious and said that the solicitor's clerk could build another house there only over Mr. Biswas's dead body. Thus Mr. Biswas drove away the solicitor's clerk from there. After the solicitor's clerk had left, Mr. Biswas discovered that he was legally entitled to a little more space around the house than had actually been enclosed by the solicitor's clerk. In the extra space Mr. Biswas planted a laburnum tree which grew rapidly, which gave to the house a romantic aspect, and the flowers of which were sweet and fragrant. The defects of the house were now soon forgotten; and, in any case, the defects had already been remedied. The children had become accustomed to living in this house. Shama had fully reconciled herself to the purchase of the house. Mr. Biswas himself too was very happy with the purchase, but soon afterwards he began to be haunted by depressing thoughts. His future again seemed uncertain to him. His son Anand had not made much progress in life. And the thought of having to repay the loan to Ajodha in the course of the next five years weighed heavily upon his mind.

11. Write short notes on

- (a) The criticism of Shekhar's wife (Dorothy) by Shekhar's sisters, and Dorothy's reaction to that criticism.
 - (b) The married life of Mr. Biswas and Shama.
- (a) The Criticism of Dorothy by Shekhars' Sisters

The Sisters' Patronizing Aids, and Dorothy's Arrogance

Shekhar, the elder son of Mrs. Tulsi, had married a Christian girl by the name of Dorothy. As Shekhar had left the Tulsi family and gone to live with his wife's parents, his sisters had been feeling that Shekhar had abandoned them. Yet his sisters had never blamed him. They had always said that he was under the influence of his wife and that the fault was entirely hers. The relations between the sisters and Shekhar's wife had continued to be unpleasant. Whenever Dorothy had visited Hanuman House in her husband's company, the

sisters had treated her in a patronizing manner. Dorothy had from the very beginning met the Tulsi patronage with arrogance because she was a modern kind of woman who flaunted her education, and who wore short frocks without caring if these frocks made her look lewd and absurd. Dorothy was a big woman who had grown fat after the birth of her first child, and her dresses hung loosely from her high hips as from a hoop. Her voice was deep and her manner hearty. Once when she had hurt her ankle, she used a stick to support herself while walking, whereupon one of the sisters had remarked that the stick suited her well. Added to all this was the fact that sometimes Dorothy sold the tickets at her father's cinema which was being managed by Shekhar. Her selling tickets was regarded by the sisters as disgraceful and immoral.

The Sisters' Grievances Against Dorothy

The sisters' jealousy of Dorothy and their hostile attitude towards her created no impression at all on Dorothy. In fact, the sisters found that their criticism of her was being nullified by events. They had said that Dorothy would not be able to run a house; but Dorothy turned out to be a very successful housewife. They had said that she was barren and would not be able to have a child, but Dorothy was giving birth to a child every two years. True that all her children had turned out to be girls, but this was hardly a triumph for the sisters because Dorothy's daughters were all girls of exceptional beauty. Besides, Dorothy had given Hindu names, such as Mira, Leela, and Lena, to her daughters. But the sisters still did not stop their criticism of Dorothy. They alleged that Dorothy, like all Christians, was using her right hand for unclean purposes. They said that Dorothy's sexual appetite was insatiable* and that her daughters already had the eyes of whores.**. Then the sisters again and again said that Shekhar was to be pitied because he had not gone for his higher studies to Cambridge University and had instead been married against his will to a wife who was shameless. As time wore on, the relations between the sisters and Dorothy worsened rather than improved. Dorothy and her daughters had now begun to spend their vacations in Venezuela and Colombia where they had picked up the Spanish language. Now Dorothy began to speak to her daughters in Spanish whenever she was visiting Shekhar's sisters. She spoke to Shekhar also in Spanish in the presence of Shekhar's sisters. Dorothy intentionally used Spanish on these occasions to annoy the sisters who had always been unfriendly towards her. The sisters felt further annoyed with Dorothy for speaking in their presence in a language which they could not understand. The sisters reacted by saying that Shekhar was to be pitied because he was very unhappy with Dorothy.

**Insatiable*—that which can never be satisfied.

***Whores*—harlots; prostitutes; immoral women.

The fact, however, was quite otherwise, because Shekhar was leading a life of perfect harmony with his wife.

(b) The Married Life of Mr. Biswas and Shama

A Bad Beginning

The married life of Mr. Biswas and Shama began on a note of unpleasantness. Mr. Biswas had been hustled into a marriage with her almost against his wishes. By having them married at the office of the registrar, Mrs. Tulsi had saved the money which she would have spent on a traditional Hindu marriage. Mr. Biswas received no dowry, but found that he had to live as a dependant of Mrs. Tulsi at Hanuman House. He promptly rebelled against this prospect and slipped away from Hanuman House even before the marriage was consummated. However, he returned to Hanuman House after a few days because Tara advised him to go back. On his return, Shama asked him if he had come back because he had felt tired of catching crabs at Pagotes. Mr. Biswas retorted that he had come back to help the Tulsi family in catching crabs because catching crabs seemed to be their chief occupation. Thus, the married life of Mr. Biswas and Shama began with an exchange of sarcastic remarks. Instead of enjoying rapturous pleasures, the newly-weds seemed to repel each other.

An Exchange of Unpleasant Remarks Continuing

At Hanuman House Mr. Biswas could not feel easy in his mind. He had conceived a dislike for the entire Tulsi family; and now he began to give an expression to this dislike by speaking to Shama in mocking tones about her family. While talking to Shama he would refer to her mother as the old hen, or as the old cow, or as a she-fox. He would refer to Shama's two brothers as the little gods; and he would refer to Seth as the big boss or the big bull. He told Shama that he regarded Hanuman House as a zoo in which her brothers were the two monkeys, while her mother was a hen or a cow, and Seth a big bull. Shama retorted that in this zoo Mr. Biswas was a "barking puppy dog". When Mr. Biswas expressed dissatisfaction with the kind of food he was being given at Hanuman House, Shama said that he had no right to complain about the food because he was not paying for it. She also told him that nobody had suggested to him that he should get married into the Tulsi family, whereupon he retorted that it was not a family but a "fowl-run". Thus, an exchange of unpleasant remarks continued between the two. When eventually Mr. Biswas behaved very badly towards Owad, Seth expelled him from Hanuman House and sent him to The Chase to run the Tulsi food-shop there.

Other Causes of the Friction Between Them

At The Chase, the relations between Mr. Biswas and Shama did not improve much. Shama expressed the view that a

house-blessing ceremony should be held. Mr. Biswas expressed his opposition to the idea; whereupon Shama began to nag him as a protest, and he had to yield. The house-blessing ceremony was performed by Hari, but it cost Mr. Biswas so much money that his resentment against Shama increased still further. However, at The Chase, Shama made herself very useful to Mr. Biswas in his shop-keeping. It was she who kept the accounts, and who maintained a proper record of the commodities bought and sold. At The Chase Mr. Biswas and Shama lived for six years and, during this period, Shama gave birth to three children, a daughter, a son, and then another daughter. Mr. Biswas's hatred for the Tulsi family did not abate at all during this period. In fact, he became furious when he found that his first daughter had been named Savi by Seth and Hari without any prior consultation with him. He also felt very angry with the Tulsi family because he found that he had been described as a labourer in Savi's birth certificate. He told Shama that he should have been described in the birth certificate as a shop-proprietor, whereupon Shama retorted that the shop did not belong to him but to Mrs. Tulsi. Whenever Mr. Biswas said anything against the Tulsi family, Shama would invariably take the side of the family, thus irritating Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas was deeply dissatisfied with his life at The Chase, particularly because the accommodation which he and his family occupied was woefully inadequate, and he blamed the Tulsi family for that.

Increasing Quarrels

After Mr. Biswas's business at The Chase had collapsed, Seth sent him to Green Vale to work on the Tulsi estate as a supervisor. Here Mr. Biswas felt even more miserable because he was given one room in the Tulsi barracks, and he had to live in most insanitary conditions. Shama had already formed a habit of going to Hanuman House with her children whenever Mr. Biswas quarrelled with her. Now Shama began to spend long periods at Hanuman House with her children, especially because Savi had joined a school at Arwacas. During the absence of Shama and the children, Mr. Biswas felt very lonely at Green Vale. On one occasion he incurred the displeasure of the entire Tulsi household by giving the present of a doll's house to his daughter Savi while giving nothing at all to any other child at Hanuman House. Shama, feeling harassed by the taunts of her sisters, broke the doll's house into pieces and threw it on a heap of rubbish. This incident greatly annoyed Mr. Biswas who severely rebuked Shama. Subsequently, Shama explained to Mr. Biswas, in the midst of her sobs, why she had broken the doll's house. At Green Vale, the morbid streak in Mr. Biswas's nature developed into a regular mental depression. He began to be haunted by fears about his future and by strange questionings. He also felt oppressed by his loneliness. He would often grumble to Shama that he had been "trapped" by her family and that her family was responsible for having put him in this "hole". At Green Vale Mr. Biswas began to build a house of his own but could not complete it.

because of a shortage of funds. On one occasion when Shama, who had been staying at Hanuman House, visited him at Green Vale, he quarrelled with her and kicked her in the belly. Shama was at this time pregnant for the fourth time. She at once packed up and went back to Hanuman House. Subsequently, Mr. Biswas suffered a nervous breakdown and was carried to Hanuman House for treatment.

The Stay at Shorthills

After recovering from his illness, Mr. Biswas one day slipped away from Hanuman House without even seeing Shama and the new baby to which Shama had given birth. He now went to Port of Spain and, after he had got a job as a newspaper reporter, he sent for Shama and the children. They all then began to live in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. There was now certainly some improvement in the relations between Mr. Biswas and Shama, but whenever Mr. Biswas made any reference to the Tulsi family he did so in a tone of mockery and bitterness. Shama had now become accustomed to his adverse comments on her family, though occasionally she too made a sarcastic retort to him. From Port of Spain Mr. Biswas and his family shifted to Shorthills at Mrs. Tulsi's suggestion, and at Shorthills Mr. Biswas again built a house of his own and was able to complete it this time. During their stay at Shorthills, Mr. Biswas made numerous sarcastic comments on the Tulsi family and on the temptations which Mrs. Tulsi had held forth to the various members of the family to induce them to shift to Shorthills. He said that their shifting to Shorthills showed that the whole Tulsi family had gone crazy. An amusing remark which Shama often made when she felt annoyed with Mr. Biswas was : "If it were not for the children....." She did not complete this remark but what she meant was that, but for the children, she would have left him. Mr. Biswas, on the other hand, often promised to buy her a gold brooch, but he made the promise jokingly and never kept it. On one occasion she felt deeply annoyed with him for having refused to help her widowed sisters from the Deserving Destitutes' Fund established by the *Trinidad Sentinel*.

The Final Phase of Their Married Life

The final phase of the married life of Mr. Biswas and Shama began when Mr. Biswas purchased a house of his own in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain. At first Shama opposed the idea of his buying a house at such a huge price. She said that he was going to tie a millstone round her neck ; but he replied that he was going to put a necklace round her neck. Then she discovered several defects in the house but now she refrained from making any comment which might have annoyed Mr. Biswas. She just remarked that the house needed some repairs. The repairs were carried out and the family moved into the new house. Mr. Biswas was in a rage with the man from whom he had bought the house, but Shama took everything

coolly. She became fully reconciled to the purchase of this house and said that she was satisfied with the house which she thought to be small but nice. As the Prologue informs us, Shama's attitude towards Mr. Biswas now underwent a change. She became less and less interested in the Tulsi family and more and more devoted to her husband. In fact, she now developed a new loyalty towards her husband; and her husband too now began to see certain admirable qualities in her. Thus at the end of the story we find that Mr. Biswas and Shama, who had led a life of disagreements, bickering, and quarrels for many years, now became well adjusted to each other. Their conjugal life now became quite smooth and harmonious. And there is no doubt that, if Mr. Biswas had lived longer, he and his wife would have enjoyed perfect marital bliss. It may, however, be pointed out that there never was, at any stage, any passion in either Mr. Biswas's heart or in Shama's. When ultimately a mutual adjustment had taken place, it was too late for any passion to manifest itself.

Q. 12. Write short notes on

- (a) **The widows in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.**
- (b) **The father-son relationship in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (or, the relations of Mr. Biswas with his son Anand).**

(a) The Widows : Their Spirit of Enterprise

The widows were those daughters of Mrs. Tulsi who, in course of time, had lost their husbands. These women had been living in Hanuman House with their husbands and children under the patronage of Mrs. Tulsi and they continued to live as Mrs. Tulsi's dependants after they became widows. They are presented to us as a group when the entire Tulsi family has moved from Hanuman House to the Tulsi estate at Shorthills. As a group, the widows showed plenty of guts and a spirit of enterprise. They undertook several projects for earning their own livelihood and for the maintenance of their children, even though most of these projects failed. For instance, on arriving at Shorthills, the widows announced that they would start a chicken-farm. Now, to feed the chickens they needed maize. So, they cut down a hillside, burned it, and planted maize. Then they bought some chickens and set them loose. At first the chickens stayed close to the house but soon afterwards they strayed away from the house and were attacked by snakes and mongooses. Those chickens which survived these attacks took to the bush, learned to fly high, and laid their eggs where the widows could not get them. Thus the project of the chicken-farm came to nothing.

Their Hard Life. The Failure of Their Projects

The widows kept themselves extremely busy at Shorthills. They were either cooking or washing or cleaning or looking after the cows.

When they were not thus busy, they made coffee or chocolate or coconut oil; or they got busy grinding maize. The result of their labours was that their clothes became patched, and the skin of their arms became very rugged. Now they looked like labourers, and they had to tolerate the comments which Seth conveyed to them through certain messengers. His comments were that it was he who had been organizing the life of the members of the Tulsi family and that now, when Mrs. Tulsi had discarded him, everybody could see the consequences. The widows, Seth said, were being punished for the way in which Mrs. Tulsi had treated him. Seth added that soon the widows would be forced to catch crabs. However, the widows had no alternative but to continue working like labourers. When the gully at Shorthills became a gorge, the widows threw a bridge of coconut trunks across it. But soon the gorge widened, and the trunks collapsed. The widows built another bridge but that collapsed also. The widows then prevailed on Mrs. Tulsi to buy lengths of rail. The rails were laid by them across the gorge; coconut trunks were then laid across the rails; and for a time this structure lasted though it was shaky and slippery. Thus even this enterprise, accomplished by the widows, produced no solid results.

Their Vain Appeal to Mr. Biswas for Financial Aid

Subsequently, on learning that Mr. Biswas had been appointed by his newspaper to investigate into the cases of destitutes seeking financial help from the Deserving Destitutes' Fund established by that newspaper, the five widows went in a group to meet him and seek monetary help from the newspaper management through him. The leader of the group was Sushila, the seniormost widow. They travelled from Shorthills to Port of Spain in order to explain their case to Mr. Biswas. They went, dressed in their best white clothes and veils. They were now seeking charity after their various schemes, such as poultry-farm, dairy-farm, sheep-raising, and vegetable-growing, had proved a complete failure. Mr. Biswas told the widows that he could not recommend their cases to the newspaper management because they were related to him; but the widows, who had travelled all the way from Shorthills to Port of Spain and had taken the trouble of putting on their best clothes and their jewellery, would not accept a negative reply from Mr. Biswas so easily. They said that he need not mention the Tulsi name while recommending them and that he could use the names of their dead husbands instead. But Mr. Biswas said that, if he were to recommend the cases of his own relatives, he would be accused of favouritism and would be dismissed from his job. Thereupon the widows stared at Mr. Biswas, sighed, shook their heads, and left. Mr. Biswas's refusal to help the widows was a cause of great disappointment to them; and his refusal annoyed their sister Shama also.

The portrayal of the widows is more or less comic though they also win our sympathy.

(b) Mr. Biswas's Deep Interest in Anand

Anand, like Savi, was born during the period of Mr. Biswas's stay at The Chase, though the actual delivery took place at Hanuman House in Arwacas. As Shama was spending long periods of time at Hanuman House, keeping the children with her, Mr. Biswas could not personally look after the upbringing of his children even though he was deeply interested in them. However, Mr. Biswas paid frequent visits to Hanuman House to meet his children and to see with his own eyes how they were being brought up. In course of time Anand was admitted to the mission school at Arwacas. But he hated going to school. Savi told Mr. Biswas that Anand was a coward because he was frightened of going to school. Chinta told Anand that, if he did not go to school regularly, he would become a grass-cutter like his father. On being told what Chinta had said, Mr. Biswas retaliated by asking Savi to inquire from Chinta if she had ever read Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. On one of his visits to Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas learnt about the punishment to which Anand had been subjected by Shama because of Anand's misdemeanour at school. Savi told Mr. Biswas that Anand had been given a beating by Shama and had then been ordered to remain in a kneeling posture on the floor. Mr. Biswas tried to console Anand and warned Shama against treating the boy in that manner. Mr. Biswas then told Anand about his own misadventure at Pundit Jairam's house when he was an immature young man. Anand now stopped crying but said that he did not want to go back to the school where everybody had ridiculed him for his failure to use the school toilet. Mr. Biswas then said that Anand could go with him to the barracks if he so wished, but Shama said that Anand must stay on at Hanuman House and continue going to school.

Mr. Biswas's Efforts to Educate His Son

On another occasion, when Shama got ready to leave Green Vale in order to go to Hanuman House, Anand declared that he did not want that his father should stay at Green Vale all alone and that therefore he (Anand) would stay back and keep his father company. And so, after Shama and the other children had left, Anand remained behind. Mr. Biswas then tried to please Anand because the boy had stood by him. However, the boy was in no mood to accept his father's attentions. For the rest of the day Anand hardly spoke to his father. On the following day Mr. Biswas took Anand with him to the fields where Mr. Biswas used to supervise the work of the labourers. Anand's experience in the fields was so unpleasant that, far from enjoying his trip, he refused to accompany Mr. Biswas again, and remained at the barracks with the dog Tarzan. In the fields Anand had been scorched by the sun and had developed an itching on his body. On his return from work in the evenings, Mr. Biswas would try to entertain Anand by making toys for the lad, and by sketching imaginary scenes such as snow-covered mountains and fir trees. One night Mr. Biswas asked

Anand who his father was. When the boy replied that he (Mr. Biswas) was his father, Mr. Biswas said that the boy's answer was wrong. He then told the boy that God was his father. Asked by Anand who he (Mr. Biswas) was then, Mr. Biswas replied that he was just "somebody", that he was "nobody" at all, that he was just a man whom Anand knew. On another night Mr. Biswas taught Anand how to mix colours. He showed the boy that red and yellow, when mixed together, made orange; and that blue and yellow, when mixed, became green. Then Mr. Biswas taught the boy that things, when released in the air, dropped to the ground because of the force of earth's gravity. He next proceeded to tell Anand about scientists like Copernicus and Galileo who had made great discoveries. On the following Saturday when Seth came and suggested that Anand should return to Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas reminded Anand of Galileo, whereupon Anand decided to stay on in the barracks with his father.

Anand, Terrified By Mr. Biswas's Condition

Anand was staying with his father at Green Vale when Mr. Biswas felt tormented by fears about his future and haunted by strange questions to which he could find no answer. The morbidity in Mr. Biswas's nature had now become a real malady. Mr. Biswas's mental agitation and the outward manifestations of it had a frightening effect upon Anand. One night, when a furious storm began to blow and when the roar of thunder was heard, Anand felt terrified. Mr. Biswas thereupon urged the boy to keep repeating the names of Rama and Sita. Anand began chanting these holy names which, Mr. Biswas said, would prove to be a source of comfort to Anand. However, the same night Mr. Biswas suffered a nervous breakdown and was carried to Hanuman House the next morning. Anand too returned to Hanuman House.

Mr. Biswas's Continuing Interest in the Boy's Studies

When Mr. Biswas had settled down in Port of Spain, Shama and the children joined him there. Anand was admitted to a school where he showed much promise. However, Anand was not really interested in studies or even in attending the school regularly. On one occasion in the course of an excursion in the company of Mr. Biswas, Owad, and Shekhar, the boy Anand was nearly drowned in the sea. This experience was so harrowing that Anand described it in his composition at school. The composition brought him twelve marks out of ten from the teacher. Anand's outstanding performance made the teacher suggest that he should prepare for the exhibition examination in order to compete for a scholarship which would enable him to pursue his studies at college. Mr. Biswas felt deeply interested in the boy's future, and so he made special arrangements for the boy's coaching. On one occasion, Anand had

his head shaved on the pretext of observing a religious ceremony. But his real reason for doing so was to avoid going to school. Mr. Biswas did not, however, stop his efforts to prepare the boy for the exhibition examination. He loved the boy deeply even though he felt it necessary to flog him once. On one occasion, when Anand expressed a strong desire to see an English film which everybody at school had seen, Mr. Biswas took the boy with him to the cinema house. However, as Mr. Biswas did not have enough money to buy the two full tickets which were required instead of one and a half tickets for which Mr. Biswas did have the money, both father and son had to return home disappointed even though Anand had sincerely suggested that Mr. Biswas should see the film and let him (Anand) go back home.

Mr. Biswas's High Hopes About Anand, and His Disappointment

As a result of the deep interest taken by Mr. Biswas in Anand's studies, Anand was able to win one of the top positions in the exhibition examination. The scholarship won by Anand enabled the young man to join a college. Mr. Biswas felt delighted by his son's success and the great possibilities which the future seemed to offer. Indeed, Anand's success in the exhibition examination and his admission to a college were occasions of the greatest happiness for Mr. Biswas whose life had otherwise been a failure up to this time. Several years later, Anand secured another scholarship which enabled him to go to England for higher studies. Mr. Biswas now began to entertain high hopes about his son's future but these hopes came to nothing. Anand began to write gloomy letters to his father. In reply, Mr. Biswas wrote humorous letters so as to keep up his son's spirits. Then Mr. Biswas got a heart-attack. Shama wrote to Anand about Mr. Biswas's illness. Anand replied that he would like to come back to Trinidad. Mr. Biswas said that he did not mind borrowing some money in order to make it possible for Anand to come back. But then Anand changed his mind. Evidently, Anand's affection for his father was not so deep as his father's affection was for him. Mr. Biswas then had a second heart-attack and was again confined to bed. Anand was still in England when Mr. Biswas died. All this would seem to show that Mr. Biswas had not been able to make a success of his relationship with Anand.

Q. 13. Examine the ironic features of *A House* for Mr. Biswas.

The Meaning of Irony

Irony results from a contrast between appearance and reality. A remark is ironical when the speaker means just the opposite of what he says. The irony in this case results from the contrast between the apparent meaning and the real or intended meaning. A situation is ironical when what happens is contrary to what we had expected would happen. The irony in this case results from a contrast between what we had thought would happen and what actually

happens, between appearance and reality. Thus, there is always an incongruity from which irony results; and the incongruity is due to the big gap or difference between appearance and reality. There are several situations in *A House for Mr. Biswas* which show the use of irony by the author. It may here be pointed out that irony is a common device employed by literary writers. Irony is employed by writers to heighten a comic or a tragic effect. If the use of irony in a remark or in a situation amuses us, the irony is known as comic irony; but if the irony employed has a saddening effect, then it is known as tragic irony.

Raghu's Death By Drowning, an Ironic Situation

There is a lot of irony, both comic and tragic, in the manner of Raghu's death by drowning. Raghu dives into the pond in order to make a search for his son, Mr. Biswas, who is believed to have slipped into the pond and possibly drowned. Raghu, in the course of his first attempt, is able to drag out the drowned calf which had been entrusted to Mr. Biswas's care. The discovery of the drowned calf confirms the general view that Mr. Biswas too might have got drowned. Raghu dives again in order to trace Mr. Biswas's dead body. Raghu does so out of his sense of duty as a father even though the village carter has repeatedly offered to dive and look for Mr. Biswas at the bottom of the pond. During his second attempt, Raghu himself gets drowned. Now, all this time, Mr. Biswas has been hiding under his father's bed at home. The irony of this situation results from the contrast between what seemed to be the case to Raghu and others and what actually is the case. Raghu and the others believed that Mr. Biswas had got drowned in the pond, while actually Mr. Biswas is safe and sound at home and is hiding under Raghu's own bed. The irony results from the contrast between appearance and reality. This irony is comic because we are really amused to find that, while Mr. Biswas is hale and hearty at home, his parents and others are feeling deeply concerned about his possible fate. But this irony is tragic also because the situation leads to the death of the head of the Biswas family, a death which afterwards has some very sad consequences for all concerned.

Mr. Biswas's Return to Hanuman House After Leaving

There is irony in Mr. Biswas's slipping out of Hanuman House after his marriage to Shama and then his having to return in order to live there. Immediately after getting married to Shama, Mr. Biswas finds the life at Hanuman House to be unacceptable to him because it means a life of subordination and subservience to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. So he leaves Hanuman House quietly and goes back to Pagotes where he explains his position to Tara. As Tara is unable to do anything for him because of the peculiar circumstances of the case, Mr. Biswas has to eat the humble pie and return to Hanuman House in order to live there. On his return he is asked by Shama

if he has come back because he had felt tried of catching crabs at Pagotes. And he replies in the same sarcastic manner, saying that he has come back because he felt it necessary to help the Tulsi family in their occupation of catching crabs. Now, there is irony in this situation because we had thought that Mr. Biswas's self-respect and his love of independence would not permit him to come back; but he does come back because of the pressure of circumstances. Thus, again we have a contrast between what we had thought would happen and what actually happens. The irony here is comic because Mr. Biswas is made to appear absurd.

The Irony in Mr. Biswas's Attempts to Achieve Independence

There is irony in Mr. Biswas's determined revolt against the Tulsi dictatorship and yet his repeatedly seeking a refuge in the Tulsi homes. He has said that the Tulsis are "blood-suckers". He has said that he would like "to paddle his own canoe". He has been making all sorts of sarcastic comments on the various members of the Tulsi family. In his private conversations with Shama he has always been denigrating the Tulsi family. When he has grossly insulted Owad, he is packed off to The Chase. But even at The Chase he has to run a food-shop which actually belongs to Mrs. Tulsi. When it comes to his notice that in Savi's birth-certificate his occupation has been specified as that of a labourer, he becomes furious. He says to Shama that his occupation should have been shown as that of a shop-proprietor. But Shama takes the wind out of his sails by pointing out that the shop belongs not to him but to Mrs. Tulsi. All his efforts to achieve independence at The Chase fail when he plays into the hands of a lawyer's tout and suffers a heavy financial loss. But once again he is put on his feet, this time at Green Vale where he is required to work as a supervisor. He wanted to paddle his own canoe, but he is still working on the Tulsi estate and getting a monthly salary from Seth. He starts building a house of his own but cannot complete it. And then he suffers a nervous breakdown. After his recovery he makes yet another effort to stand on his own feet, but even in Port of Spain he can find no independent accommodation and has to accept Mrs. Tulsi's offer that he should live with his family in her house and pay a monthly rent to her. Subsequently, he agrees to go and live in Mrs. Tulsi's house at Shorthills. At Shorthills too his effort to establish himself independently fails because the house he has built for himself and his family is burned down by a fire. Once again he and his family have to live in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Eventually he quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi and quits her house. Now, there is an irony in this entire account of Mr. Biswas's career from the time of his becoming a shopkeeper at The Chase till his final break with Mrs. Tulsi. The irony results from what Mr. Biswas, and we too, believe would happen and what actually happens. Every time Mr. Biswas, and we with him, believe that he is going to stand upon his own feet and become an entirely independent man, but every time Mr. Biswas and we find him in a

situation in which he has to depend upon Mrs. Tulsi to a greater or lesser extent. Every time what happens is the opposite of what had been expected or anticipated or desired. And the irony is partly comic and partly tragic. It is amusing because we find all Mr. Biswas's attempts and efforts proving to be unsuccessful and making him look absurd; and it is tragic because we sympathize deeply with Mr. Biswas in his predicament each time.

Mr. Biswas's Acceptance of Compensation

One of the incidents in the story is Mr. Biswas's accepting the amount of compensation which Seth had received from the insurance company in respect of the loss which had been suffered by the Tulsi family and by Mr. Biswas as a result of the food-shop at The Chase having been burned down. There is comic irony here because initially Mr. Biswas had rejected completely Seth's idea of "insureburn". Mr. Biswas had thought it to be unworthy of himself that he should deliberately set fire to the shop after getting it insured and then claim compensation from the insurance company. But when Seth does the whole thing on his behalf, Mr. Biswas quietly pockets the amount of the compensation. The irony here results from the contrast between what we had expected from Mr. Biswas and what Mr. Biswas actually does. Here, again, Mr. Biswas appears absurd because he has made a fool of himself.

Mr. Biswas's Theft of Oranges

There is irony in Mr. Biswas's plucking oranges stealthily from the Tulsi trees at Shorthills and then selling these oranges to a shopkeeper in Port of Spain. While selling the oranges, Mr. Biswas tells the shopkeeper that he has brought these oranges from his own trees growing in the backyard of his house. Now, we had formed a very favourable impression of Mr. Biswas as an honest and self-respecting man. But our expectations are belied when we find him behaving dishonestly. When Mr. Biswas behaves in this way, he comes down to the level of Govind and W.C. Tuttle who have been cutting down Tulsi trees and selling them for their personal gain. Thus once again Mr. Biswas appears to be an absurd man.

Mr. Biswas's Duty as an Investigator

There is irony in Mr. Biswas's working as an investigator of the cases of destitutes who have applied for financial help from the Deserving Destitutes' Fund established by the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Here Mr. Biswas himself recognizes the irony of the situation. The irony is that Mr. Biswas is himself more or less a destitute, and a deserving one at that. If anyone requires financial help, it is Mr. Biswas himself. And yet we find Mr. Biswas going about in search of deserving cases; we find him going into the slum areas and interviewing all sorts of persons to verify the facts about them in order

to determine whether they deserve financial help or not. Normally, we would expect only a well-to-do or prosperous man to perform such duties, but here a penniless man is examining the cases of other penniless persons. The irony here, therefore, results from what was expected and what is actually happening. This irony too is partly comic and partly pathetic.

Q. 14. Would you regard Mr. Biswas as a hero ? Give reasons for your answer.

Or

Does Mr. Biswas attain the stature of a hero in Naipaul's novel ?

Not a Hero in the Traditional Sense. Weak and Mediocre. An Anti-Hero

Mr. Biswas is by no means a hero in the traditional sense. A hero in a novel is generally portrayed as a near-ideal person. A hero is shown as being strong, brave, virtuous, free from spite or malice, kind-hearted and considerate, highly intelligent, very effective in his dealings with other people, and so on. A hero generally triumphs over all the odds and circumstances of life, so that at the end of a story we find ourselves envying him in every respect. Now, Mr. Biswas cannot be described as a hero in that sense because he suffers from several shortcomings, deficiencies, and limitations. There is much which is petty and contemptible about Mr. Biswas. In certain situations we find him behaving in an irrational and perverse manner. Some of his actions are absurd. In fact, one critic describes Mr. Biswas as "the absurd man". According to this critic, Mr. Biswas is fated, like Oedipus, to kill his father; but, unlike Oedipus, Mr. Biswas fulfils this prophecy in the most ridiculous way. Mr. Biswas's father is drowned in a pool in the course of an attempt to rescue Mr. Biswas when Mr. Biswas is actually hiding under his father's bed at home. At Mr. Biswas's birth it had been predicted that he would grow into a liar, a lecher, and a spendthrift. Of course, he does not grow into an immoral man of that kind, but he certainly does not attain any high distinction in any field. His rebellion against the Tulsi family and its tyranny is the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man. The Tulsi family regards him as a buffoon and a trouble-maker. In view of all this, it would not be far wrong to describe him as an anti-hero.

Weighty Evidence Against His Being Regarded as a Hero

The traditional hero in a novel generally attains a high degree of success in any enterprise which he undertakes. Mr. Biswas, on the contrary, reaps only failure in almost every undertaking. He fails as an assistant to Bhandat at the latter's rum-shop and is turned out by Bhandat in disgrace. Then he meets an even worse fate at the

house of Pundit Jairam from where again he is driven out ignominiously. As a consequence of his having been forced to eat too many bananas, he suffers from indigestion, and this indigestion becomes a chronic trouble with him. All his life he suffers from indigestion, and Mclean's Stomach Powder or bicarbonate of soda becomes the most important item of food for him, as he himself jokingly puts it. He lets his calves swing like hammocks, thus looking ridiculously. He does not have any strong filial or fraternal feelings. He does not show any deep devotion to his mother Bipti, and he does not have any deep love either for his brothers or for his sister. He does not even achieve much success in his relationship with his son Anand. He is no judge of human nature. He is easily duped by a lawyer's tout at The Chase and, later, by a solicitor's clerk. He fails not only as a shopkeeper and as a supervisor, but also as a writer of short stories. He does succeed somewhat as a newspaper-reporter but he begins to feel extremely uneasy when he is appointed an investigator of deserving destitutes. Even as a Community Welfare Officer he develops a distaste for his work. There is a strong morbid streak in his nature. In his mid-career, when he is yet at Green Vale, he begins to feel oppressed by his fears about his future and by strange questionings. His gloom and despondency at Green Vale go on increasing till he suffers a nervous breakdown. He is unable to complete his house at Green Vale ; and, later, when he does succeed in building a house at Shorthills, his house is burned down by an accidental fire. He tries to liberate himself from the stranglehold of Tulsidom, and yet, every time he is overtaken by some crisis, he seeks the shelter of Tulsi homes. Eventually, he dies as a heart-patient. In the light of all these facts, we could say that Naipaul did not intend this man to be a hero.

His Rebellion Against Tulsidom, a Heroic Quality

In spite of all that has been said above, it is possible to regard Mr. Biswas as a hero. Mr. Biswas is surely an Everyman because of his ordinariness and because of the various limitations he suffers from. But he stands head and shoulders above an Everyman in one important respect. He is a man possessing plenty of self-respect and an unquenchable thirst for independence. He is a hero by virtue of these qualities of self-respect and love of freedom. His whole life is a quest after identity. He does not want to merge his individuality with the Tulsi household. When, after getting married to Shama, he discovers that as a Tulsi son-in-law he would have to lead a life of servility to his mother-in-law Mrs. Tulsi and his uncle-in-law Seth, he rebels against the system prevailing at Hanuman House. Without even embracing or touching Shama, he slips out of Hanuman House and goes back to his mother's lodging and then to his aunt Tara's house. It is another matter that, not getting much support from either Bipti or Tara, he goes back to Hanuman House. But at Hanuman House he certainly does not fall in line. He does not follow the example of the other Tulsi sons-in-law. He bluntly tells Govind that he cannot surrender his freedom to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth

and that he believes in "paddling his own canoe". He goes to the extent of describing the Tulsis as "blood-suckers". In his conversations with Shama, he invariably makes sarastic remarks about the various members of the Tulsi family. He refers to his mother-in-law as a "she-fox". He describes the Tulsi home as a zoo in which Seth is a big bull, and in which Mrs. Tulsi is an old cow. His disgust with the Tulsi family, and the dictatorship which it symbolizes, leads him to such ugly actions as gargling and throwing out the water over Owad's head, and then throwing a plateful of food over the same young man's head in order to insult him even further. The Tulsi family believes in steam-rolling the individualities of the various persons living in Hanuman House. But Mr. Biswas cannot tolerate the extinction or even the suppression of his individuality. It is this instinct for self-assertion and self-development which imparts to him a heroic quality.

His Success in Acquiring His Own House and Becoming Independent

This particular trait in the character of Mr. Biswas not only remains with him till the very end, but goes on becoming stronger with the passing of time. It is true that, in times of difficulty, he has to seek the shelter of the Tulsi homes; but that is more for the sake of his family than for his own sake. He fails as a shopkeeper at The Chase because he does not have in him the makings of a tradesman. Commerce and trade are not his sphere. He fails as a supervisor at Green Vale because he has no natural aptitude for that kind of work also. He suffers from a morbid streak, and it is this which brings about his nervous collapse. In this sad condition he is carried to Hanuman House where he is nursed back to health. But even then he cannot reconcile himself to living in Hanuman House as a dependant. He once again quietly slips away from Hanuman House, this time going to Port of Spain to try his luck there. He does achieve a measure of success as a newspaper reporter, even though some of the duties connected with his job are disagreeable to him. He is by nature a sensitive man, and he does not find it pleasant or acceptable to deal with people who are rough or crude in their manners. He does not like going to the slum areas where he has to come into contact with all sorts of low-class persons who have no sense of cleanliness or decency. Of course, there are drawbacks in his character. But, despite all the setbacks, he does not lose his self-respect and his love of independence. If he agrees to live in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain, it is because such an arrangement would make it possible for him to be united with his family. If he agrees to move to Mrs. Tulsi's house at Shorthills, it is because he thinks that he can save some money to build a house of his own. And he does build his own house at Shorthills though he is deprived of the pleasure of living there for a long time because the house catches fire and is wrecked. When he finds the conditions of life in Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain to be intolerable after the return of Owad, he quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi. On being asked to quit the

house, he declares that he regrets the day when he had stepped into this house in the first instance. He then makes a feverish search for separate and independent accommodation, and buys a house of his own even though he has to borrow a large amount of money from Ajodha on interest in order to pay the full amount to gain possession of the house. At last he finds himself an absolutely independent man, free from the hold of Mrs. Tulsi and free from the suffocating atmosphere of the various Tulsi homes.

His Sense of Humour and His Wit

One other quality which contributes to the favourable impression which Mr. Biswas makes upon our minds is his unfailing sense of humour and his wit. We have already noted his sarcastic description of Hanuman House and of the various members of the Tulsi family. Throughout the novel we find him making amusing remarks about people and about events. Mr. Biswas does not lose his sense of humour even in depressing circumstances. For instance, when the shop at The Chase shows losses, he asks Shama if Hari can be invited to come and "unbless" the shop so that the shop may make some profit. At Shorthills, he tells Shama that he cannot understand the madness which has overtaken her family who have left Arwacas to settle at this far-off place. Seeing many bamboo trees on the estate, he mockingly says to Mrs. Tulsi : "A lot of bamboo. You can start a paper factory." Even when his own house has been destroyed by fire, he ironically says that, if anybody wants charcoal, plenty of it is now available at his charred house, adding that the ashes from the burnt house can be collected and used as a kind of fertilizer. His stealing oranges from the Tulsi trees at Shorthills and then selling them for private profit to a shop in Port of Spain is certainly an unworthy and unheroic act but that is one of Mr. Biswas's many shortcomings, comparable to the perversity which he has throughout his life been displaying in his frequent quarrels with Shama.

A Moral Hero of Sorts

Mr. Biswas is not a hero in a physical sense. His bodily infirmities, his constant brooding over his future, and his frequently sinking into a void show that. He is not an intellectual giant, as is clear from his failure as a writer of magazine articles and as a writer of short stories. But he is a moral hero (despite his thieving at Shorthills) ; and his sense of humour and fertile wit add to whatever stature he attains as a character in the novel. Throughout his career, Mr. Biswas preserves his integrity. Throughout he remains essentially true to himself.

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*This is by far the most illuminating book of criticism relating to Naipaul's work.

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